North of Minneapolis: Short Stories

Honors Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
with honors research distinction in English in the undergraduate
colleges of The Ohio State University

by

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The Ohio State University
April 2014

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For my family

And were an epitaph to be my story,
I'd have a short one ready for my own.
I would have written of me on my stone:
I had a lover's quarrel with the world.

— Robert Frost, "The Lesson for Today"

Contents

The Scarf

I THOUGHT SHE smelled like wild mint. Winter had snuck up early that fall, and the darkness slowly thickened as we sipped cocoa in my mother's kitchen. Neither of us spoke. Her name was Maggie Brison, and her father shoveled our snow when it stormed, as it does and neighbors often do in Buford, Wisconsin. He was a factory man with wet eyes and heavy jowls, still fifteen years from his pension, still forgetting to clear a path for the postman. All the same, we were grateful for the help, and I was grateful for the chance to share time with his daughter, who was twelve, two years older than me. I swallowed a final, grainy mouthful, straining to watch her as I kept my eyes facing forward. Her plum sweater dipped about the neck as she bowed her head and brought the cup to her lips. Our knees brushed under the table and my cheeks grew hot. The soft clamor of the furnace rose from the vent near my feet. I thought how wonderful it felt to have something warm to drink when it was dark and cold, and how Maggie Brison must smell like wild mint because she was lovely and that was the loveliest image my mind could conjure.

I heard Mr. Brison scraping his shovel along the ground, walking up the driveway toward the house. He came inside and, stamping his boots upon the rubber mat, called for Maggie from the front hall. She rose silently, balling her mittens in a clump, and said goodbye to my mother, whom I had failed to notice washing dishes in the sink. Together they walked through the house, my mother whispering and Maggie smiling in a soft, polite way. I did not know what secrets they enjoyed and I made no move to join. Mr. Brison sighed, probably unclamping his earmuffs, and mentioned that he could come by with a pail of salt if the ice were too slick in the morning. "Please don't worry, Mick," my mother said, "I could use a good spill to knock some sense into me." She laughed richly before asking if she might cook him dinner, nothing special, sometime

following the holiday. And bring along Maggie, please. And Mrs. Brison. The plans were made and the door ticked shut, the house quiet save for the sound of heat filling the pipes.

My mother returned to the kitchen, lightly rapping my skull as she passed.

"A gentleman," she said, "will always show a lady to the door." She pared her fingernail with her thumb, not looking up. "And a lady will always give him a chance."

She went to the sink to continue the dishes, mumbling a tune about the birds and the bees and the educated fleas, for a long time rinsing and drying as if I was not present, large and warm, plump-wristed, elegant with a dishcloth. She might have been a woman on the frontier scouring cornmeal from the bottom of a blackened skillet, in which case I wondered what that would have made me. I hated cornbread and would probably be kidnapped by Indians or dead from cholera. My mother could survive, though, even if it meant washing skillets for the rest of her natural life. Finally, I said, "Where can I get mint?"

"Let me see. How should I know? What do you care about mint for?"

"I don't care," I said. "Not even a little."

Maggie and her parents arrived for dinner on a cold night a few weeks later. I tried to stay close to her, to smell if she was the same, but I could only sense the odor of my mother's beef stew and of Mr. Brison's sickly menthol cigarettes. We cleared the unwrapped newspapers from the kitchen table and, without saying grace, began to eat, no wine, just milk and bread and stew. Mr. Brison wiped his mouth with his cuffs and asked how our Thanksgiving was, it being freezing and all. He could not fathom how those crazy people in New York watched balloons in that kind of weather. Of course, they had gone ice fishing up in Hayward, or, at any rate, had tried to.

"Her family, not mine," Mr. Brison said, aiming his spoon toward Mrs. Brison.

Maggie squirmed at my elbow. She wore a red dress that buttoned up to her throat and that she kept scratching, her skin throbbing pink under the coarse cloth. It – that is, the dress – brought to mind something I could picture, but could not quite place. My mother owned a huge book of paintings that might once have been valuable but was now too stained by little fingers to be treasured by anyone except me, who leafed through it on nights she came home late. I liked one collection of oil portraits best. It belonged to a Frenchman, like nearly all of them, who painted peasant girls fetching water in broken pitchers and peasant sisters embracing each other along limestone walls. The red of the dress summoned another work, an olive-skinned woman holding – what was it? The word eluded me, then was found.

"You look like a pomegranate," I whispered, though three pairs of eyes still fell upon me. Maggie, too, stopped scratching and turned, her fine mouth twisted as if someone had dissolved a bitter pearl in her milk and she had swallowed more than she knew. "I mean your dress, the red. I mean, you look very pretty."

She swept a loop of hair behind her ear and a small smile broke upon her lips. "You look handsome tonight, too," she said. I winced. A nurse with whom my mother worked had a son ahead of me in school, a great brute almost twice my size. Every year, the woman would fill a trash bag with the clothes that he had outgrown and present the lumpy bundle to my mother over bloodied sutures and foaming pans of sickness. My mother, nothing if not practical, and perhaps equally inured to indignity, accepted the clothes happily and always gave the woman a tin of kolacky in the winter as a thank-you gift. And here I was, engulfed in a frayed wool cardigan, the long sleeves rolled thick, pricked and itched by what another had discarded, sloughed off. Maggie was merely being gracious, and her kindness stung my eyes.

"Thank you," I said, and I found my mother studying me through the candles.

Mrs. Brison, who had scarcely spoken all evening, set down her napkin and re-ordered the silverware on one side of her bowl, then did the same on the other. She moved like a wounded bird, desperate and fragile, and I thought she might cry. There are those people in the world who, judged by the peculiar tilt of their chin or the vacant depth of their eyes, should evoke a profound sense of pity in an observer, but who instead stir contempt for presiding over such an empty, thin existence. Watching her scrape crumbs in a heap, hands soft and pale from disuse, I knew Mrs. Brison belonged to this group, though I felt no such antipathy. I did not understand it, but I feared a similar fate for myself. There is only us on this earth, small and vain, and there is no sense in thinking ill toward any.

My mother served wedges of spice cake and black coffee, the whisking of her slippers on the kitchen linoleum the lone sound for a time. We settled in the den, a sallow sunken room with wood-paneled walls and a small upright piano in the corner. Mr. Brison was still upset about the election, remarking that the Clintons would have eleven – eleven! – balls to attend after the inauguration next month. Who alive needed eleven balls? A king, for the sake of appearances, he guessed, and probably the pope too, him being such an important figure and whatnot. Our own Mayor Lundegaard had organized a fish fry at the Buford Rotary Club upon his swearing-in, but he had paid for it out-of-pocket. And Caligula, to be sure, Mr. Brison added. The discussion dwindled rather quickly from there, since my mother did not vote and I was luckily still ignorant of politics and cable news. Even so, I liked how a poor boy, some Arkansas hillbilly who never knew his father, could grow up to become the President of the United States.

"Maggie," my mother said, waving vaguely toward the piano, "your father told me you're learning to play." Maggie nodded, visibly pleased. "We'd really love to hear a song." Bless my mother, what a brilliant idea that was! I scrambled to retrieve some flaking sheet music from the

stool, pinching my fingers under the lid. My mother had seen a jazz pianist for a few months in the spring of the last year, and the man had tried his best to teach me the art. I could keep good time, but there were simply too many notes for my hands to master. "Can't we just lose some of them?" I asked him. "Sure," he had said, "which ones?" When things between them went sour, he abandoned the piano, a damp and creaky machine, and it had remained dormant until Maggie slipped her dress beneath her legs and sat before the keys.

"How about something slow," my mother suggested, and Maggie selected a piece from the top of the yellowing pile. Mrs. Brison slumped beside me on the sofa, while Mr. Brison and my mother stood together across the floor. The first bars of a waltz sprang forth from the steel strings, a work I had never achieved. I could hear the deep croak of the pianist – his name was Simon – his hand drumming the rhythm on my shoulder, his voice mixed with the faint memory of my mother's laughter, the soft rattle of glass and ice, the keys. The music floated about the room. Maggie, in the beginning cautious, then soon more sure, slowly twined each note with the last, pausing only to locate an elusive key or uncurl a flickering page, her brow creasing when she met a surprising chord and her eyes widening where the ink had flooded from a spilt tumbler. Her slender arms trembled metrically, and I now remember how tiny she looked, though so taken by her childish beauty, I must have felt no larger than the hammer that percussed each string. Her white fingers kissed the keys lighter and lighter until it seemed she was no longer playing, but instead divining some murmurous hymn yet unheard by human ears. A hot, foreign desire brimmed within me, a fever cracking across my brain like an egg of fire. In that moment, I sensed something soft and pure pouring from my soul, flushed away, but filled again by an ancient force that was to conduct my life and the lives of every boy my age. I belonged to

Maggie Brison. I saw her willowy figure embracing the piano and the oily stains along the walls of my mother's house, and I felt hot and ashamed and in love.

Mrs. Brison, asleep at my side, choked on her own spit. My mother and Mr. Brison had fled to the kitchen, their voices hushed and gay. The song swirled to a close, the echo fading into distant sounds of children shouting in the street and Mrs. Brison's raspy gulps. I found myself holding my breath, the long sleeves of my sweater balled up in my fists. It was after ten o'clock. Maggie turned, smiled, blushed at the sight of her vanished audience.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked. She scratched the neck of her dress. When does a young girl become aware of her ability to inspire and deride the watercolor dreams of such a hapless boy like me? I have not yet decided.

"It was wonderful," I said. "I'd like to hear another."

Her gaze lingered upon me for an instant before she peeled a fresh page from the heap and began to play again. My mother's laughter streamed from the other room. It was supposed to snow in the morning, thick and wet. Closing my eyes, I fixed my mind on the pulsing keys and my heart swelled with hope, as the cold brewed in the clouds above.

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It stormed all that week and into the next, and while Mr. Brison found himself at our home nearly every other day, Maggie did not return. She had to rehearse for the Christmas pageant at her school, which was not my own, but a private academy in another parish, where the girls wore stockings and checkered skirts, and the eldest ones smoked with their boyfriends by the creek when the weather was good and bright. In those days without her, I experienced a dim, heavy ache, the kind that comes when one passes an unlit house and knows its occupants to be absent, rather than asleep. I wished terribly to share Maggie's company once more, to revive her music,

to memorize her beauty. And if I had a hot drink, so much the better. Even still, the depths of this love frightened me. Like the boy who injures himself in the course of a forbidden pursuit and must conceal the source of his pain, I too told no one.

In the meanwhile, my mother often returned from the hospital well-past dark, the acrid scent of antiseptic and orange flower on her skin. She would float through the door while I was reading, toss away her keys, and say, how about a couple inches of Crown? and, what the heck time is it, anyhow? There was a brightness about her I did not fully recognize. She smiled while folding laundry and scrubbing the bathtub. Her laughter came quicker, with less reserve. She began reading the newspaper each morning, even trying the crossword puzzle, throwing up her hands cheerfully whenever she was stumped. When the Prince and Princess of Wales announced their separation, she watched the television with tears in her eyes and said, "Well, bully for her, that's what I think." It was as if, reflecting upon a clock, she had stopped troubling herself with each discrete spring and wheel, and instead surrendered herself to the contours of the dial and the soft, mechanical rhythm of the hands, knowing that lost time was just a feature of the craft.

One bleak Sunday afternoon, I discovered a parcel on our front steps, wrapped in gold paper and knotted with a ribbon. There were no letters in the mailbox and no cars on the street, and the box itself had no postage. The wetness of the salted snow had not even dampened the bottom. I searched vainly for the sender, giving the slim package a shake, and took it inside to the kitchen table. The lone clue was a small card that read, *Merry Christmas Maureen!!* in tight, little scrawl. It was a gift for my mother. That night, she broke the ribbon and carved the paper, revealing a plain square box. Within lay a scarf the colors of dark wine and fresh cream, soft, made from cashmere or camel hair, we did not know which. It had a long, exotic design that twisted and plunged in fleurs-de-lis and paisley drops, and I grew dizzy with excitement trying to

follow its impossible pattern. We studied the exquisite thing for a long while, running it through our fingers, careful to keep it from the soiled counter. I asked how many of these the ex-Princess of Wales had in her closet, and my mother ventured easily three, possibly even four. At last, she swathed the scarf around her neck, threw the excess behind her shoulder, and exclaimed:

"It seems your mother has herself an admirer. How's that for a kick in the head?"

In truth, she had enjoyed many admirers over the years and had declined quite a few marriage proposals. Though she had grown a bit of a paunch in middle age and needed a fistful of aspirin in the morning for her thinning bones, her looks had not faded much, as far as I could tell, and she still preserved something of a magnetism that induced many men to behave foolishly in her presence. My mother could stomach neither vulgarity nor vanity, and the greatest virtue a person could possess, to her mind, was thrift. The men who would not last were gone almost immediately. Those who did remain were welcomed into our home fully. A local television anchor once usurped half the garage storing his crates of crumbling newsprint, then said he had been dispatched to Iraq. An M.F.A. student, the son of an inspector at the LaFollette County Department of Public Health, spent two months sharing my bedroom the summer I turned seven. A former minor league third baseman offered to build a diamond in the backyard, plowing up the grass and chalking baselines. He never finished the project, instead returning to his wife and pregnant mistress living in Milwaukee. The land had stayed a burnt patch of dirt.

As for gifts, no man had taken her to the opera. Her jewelry chest was shallow and bare. She liked merlot, if someone bothered to inquire. My mother had never been given a scarf.

She nestled the scarf back in its box and, leaving it upon her dresser, mused aloud who might escort her to the Saint Agnes Academy Christ and Christmas Revue, featuring our very own Maggie Brison, this Friday only! After all, she said, it could be the last opportunity to say

goodbye before the Brisons left for Saginaw to visit family. Saginaw? I realized, with rising alarm, that I would not see my love again until after the New Year. Anything could happen in those intervening weeks, another boy might capture Maggie's heart, I could very well perish from that thought alone. I would have to attend and make a grand declaration of my love.

In the ensuing days, I refined every detail in my mind. How I would take Maggie's hand in my own and confess my adoration, how I would plead for her love in return, how I would ask forgiveness for my flaws as a boy and promise to become a man. I would brush the copper hair from her face and say, take care, my sweet, I shall curse each day that does not deliver you to my waiting arms, explaining that I was not quite as husky as I appeared, it was only that my pants were rather too large. Finally, I would press my lips to hers and feel her breath in my lungs, her mouth on my kiss. It could not fail.

Friday was pale and frosty, the hours imperceptibly crawling across the sky. I rested near our broad front window, watching the winter landscape – a stout snowman waved outside the Brison house, surely dappled with the gloved prints of my beloved! – picturing the bright electric glow of Christmas morning. I wanted a toboggan to take down Badger Hill, where the boys raced on foot and on sled, though no one would lend you theirs if you came without one. For my mother, I had cleverly painted a blank globe to resemble Mars, thus expanding the universe hanging on our tree, which now consisted of Venus from the previous year, Earth from the year before that, and a silver star spun out of wire that I had decided would represent the sun to save myself some time.

Taking up the worn book of art, still looking out the window, I considered the girls in the paintings gathering chestnuts from the ground or herding geese, and I tried to figure out if they were the artist's children or his neighbors or what. Were they real people? I would marry them,

I decided, if I was a painting in the book. Then I thought, did Maggie Brison like chestnuts and birds and artwork? What about the perfumed sting of pine needles crushed by unslippered feet? Maybe she refused to wear socks on winter nights so that the heat of her bed felt lovely after the chill of the floor when she leapt beneath the covers, as I often did. Maybe she warmed her pajamas by stowing them under her pillows, too. I was positive I would soon learn the answers to these questions.

My mother emerged from the staircase dressed in her scrubs, saying she had to visit the hospital for a few hours, but would be back in time for the pageant. If I was hungry, there was macaroni in the refrigerator.

I sat by the window as she pulled away, drawing letters and numbers on the dusty sill. Across the street, Mr. Brison came outside to clear the snow from his car. I picked up the book again and leafed back to the painting of the woman holding the pomegranate, her hair covered in gold and purple silk, gazing off from the viewer. It looked like she had just been given the fruit, her shoulder turning away in acceptance. Her eyes were dark and her brow was dark, and she was ready to break the red shell in two, not greedily, not even eagerly, only just about to have a pomegranate to eat. Then an awful feeling began to fizz in my belly: I had forgotten a gift.

It was mere days ahead of Christmas morning, when Maggie would be awash in her own joyous glow, and I had nothing to offer, nothing to make manifest my love. She would travel to Michigan and I would be forgotten, no trace beneath the tree. I closed the book trembling. Never had I conceded the limits of such a bold plan for love, never had I doubted the wisdom of my whole endeavor. I briefly considered how I might join the Franciscans, a jolt of faith to repair my suffering, though my grip on the catechism was tenuous at best, to say nothing of the somewhat irreligious nature of my crisis. The painful solution grew plain.

I crept into my mother's bedroom and found the scarf box upon her dresser, casting aside the lid with force that surprised me. It was rumpled, and a pair of stone earrings, only slightly darker than the scarf itself, clinked amid the pleats. I raised it in my palms, stroking the smooth cloth, trying to think not of my mother modeling it before the mirror, still wearing the filth of the infirmed and unwashed. Cradling the cherished thing against my face, I felt warped by love and conceit, delirious with expectation. My hands made final the crime I had already committed a million times over in my heart.

I stole my mother's scarf.

I slouched away.

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As my mother and I entered the theatre, she still in her hospital dress, not having had the time to change clothes – what excellent fortune, my theft remained undetected! – the notes of a chiming overture receded into the darkness. A chorus of little voices soon warmed the hall and we found our seats, the purloined scarf weighing upon my breast, rising and falling with every breath. Little girls in long stocking caps warbled carols in lilting tones, followed by ruddy angels on ice skates, the hay from the nativity scene swishing about their ankles. A woodwind quartet closed the first part of the program, the tiny bassoonist led away in tears, her tiny cries as squeaky as her broken reed. Without a sound, the curtains fell.

During the intermission, my mother plucked the handbill from my fingers and began to crease it, first lengthwise, then over, then lengthwise again, creating a tight, jagged pattern in the paper. She crooked her spine to conceal the finished craft, then presented it in an upturned palm. It was a flower, a rose. A pear-shaped classics professor at the university had taught her origami years before and, for some reason, now the talent had returned. We used to have swans and

frogs scattered across the house, made from wrapping and parchment paper, unpaid telephone bills, pages torn from the telephone book. She dropped the rose in my lap.

"Why don't you give this to Maggie?" she said. "Boy, that'll sure do the trick."

The pageant resumed as the girls of the Sixth Grade filed onto the stage, luminous in their snowy dresses. I sat forward in my seat, skimming each smooth face. Something was wrong. Where was Maggie? Looking more quickly, I feared disaster, a treachery that would spite the hours spent bereft of my love, stage fright or maybe the flu. Gloom, then dread, snarled my dusky heart at the thought of theft unconsummated, the scarf replaced and the crime unknown, except unto me and my Creator. I had stolen, and for what? To act like all the men who came in pursuit of my mother? I was sick within and of myself. And then my blood began to whirl – Maggie was sitting before the piano.

The melody I can barely recall, but the sight of her fingers upon the keys renewed my love again and still again, swept me back to the first gentle stings of devotion, the kindling and the ache. That boy in the December night an impossible few weeks ago, he was not me, a fraud and a child. He longed for the hallowed, fatal music and nothing more. He could not imagine pinching even a spoonful of sugar from his dearest mother. I had swallowed the bait, feeling not exactly guilt, but awe at how swiftly fresh could flow into brackish, brackish into salt.

As the lights came up and I blinked away the darkness, my mother instructed me to find Maggie, please. She must speak to Mr. Brison alone for a minute. I walked slowly through the corridors of the school, passing portraits of girls with bobbed hair and tight curls, some pretty and some not, some of whom had gone overseas as nurses in the wars, some of whom had built up the country at home. Many were already dead. One girl had become the first female sheriff of any town in the state of Wisconsin. I walked onward, the sweet words of my avowal burbling

within, ignoring an entire century's worth of women who paled beside my love. I was certain that this day would prevail in future years as the beginning of an unborn bliss. The hall emptied into an open foyer apart from the theatre where the performers now gathered after the show. There I saw Maggie, white silk on marble skin, surrounded by other girls drinking punch and eating pastries with their cupped hands catching crumbs below. Someone was narrating a story in an excited murmur, and they all huddled near so as not to miss a second. The climax finally revealed, a bright plume of laughter burst from the group, incidental snorts adding to the mirth. "It's the truth, I swear!" the storyteller insisted. "Cross my heart!" At last, Maggie looked up.

"Maggie!" I cried, though the word, if it was indeed a word and not a forlorn prayer, surely seemed far too soft for her to hear. But she did hear, and she broke free from the group, hewing a path through the knots of families talking in rosy tones. Four steps, three steps, two. As she neared, her beauty parched my foolish throat, and I choked upon the silly romance of my own designs. All I had prepared, every sentiment true and unvarnished, turned vapor in my brain and left me barren before her. I stood cold and dumb in an ugly sweater not my own.

"Hell-lo," she said. She grasped her arm in her opposite hand and I watched the thin, silver bracelets tumble down her wrist, soft copper twines hanging in her face. I remember the moment with such clarity, astride the threshold of a looming new order, my boyhood waning rapidly behind me. I had a fleeting picture in my head of her eating mouthfuls of spaghetti at our kitchen table, her long, pink fingers twirling a fork, hunched over the book of paintings, saying, these are the girls, really? I know, I was saying, but they don't matter now because I have you, as my mother soaked a pot in the sink. My mother. My mother's paper rose was in my hand, her scarf was in my coat, and all the while Maggie Brison looked at me in a way so melting, so perfectly liquid, that the greatest joy beast or boy could conceive seemed well within my reach.

Yet I knew not what would follow. An empty box on my mother's dresser could not stay closed forever. Mr. Brison did not bother to ring the bell that evening, after the pageant, he just charged in the house, his wet eyes smoldering with hurt and betrayal. My mother said nothing, she merely smeared the heat from her cheeks. And though the scarf was pitched across the kitchen counter, my theft exposed and all restored, I wondered, did she cry for the fall of her son or for something else I could not understand?

Maggie waited for my silence to fade, curious and smiling. From behind her, the restless girls began to laugh. Soon the storyteller called, "Maggie, come on already! Did you ever hear the one about Thomas and his chickens?" She glanced back, shaking her head. A small splotch of punch, dark and red, bloomed across her gown.

Looking upon that blemish, I felt an awful tide rushing through my spirit, the conceit of my heart spilling forth in a vast crimson wave the clownish hue of children's juice. A child and a girl she was, and I deserved no right to presume or desire her to be anything but childish and girlish. There had long existed in me a fevered wish to build pillars from pebbles and to worship that which I had created. But now I saw only dust, blurred in the pools that burned my face.

"You've ruined your dress," I said.

"Oh."

The scarf was thick against my heart. I slipped it from my coat in a blustery spiral, and the faint scent of my mother consumed my senses. She had tried to transform the abandoned baseball diamond into a vegetable garden, digging dirt alone in the summer heat, plodding inside with sweat and yesterday's shampoo in her hair, coffee percolating in the kitchen, old books grassy and rotting in the cool dimness of the house where I sat reading. I offered the scarf to Maggie Brison without meeting her puzzled gaze. Something about the way she crumpled it in

her fist made me ill, and still does today. No, she did not smell like wild mint. Our fingers never even touched. "Merry Christmas," I said, the final, hard words that would pass between us.

I walked outside into the darkness and sank upon a swell of snow, the night unspooling before me. Children and parents began trickling from the school, their voices drifting away in the frozen air. Somewhere in that crowd of strangers was my mother, coming to find her son.

So these things were when you were a boy.

Wind hissed through my sweater, passing silently in the empty trees. It would snow again that evening, and perhaps the next, as well. The milky moon hung low in the sky, and I wondered how many more nights like this I would learn to endure.

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A Little Stranger

MICHAEL CAME HOME to a baby in the kitchen. He slung his knapsack upon the table, swabbed the hot sweat from his brow, and discovered it asleep, soft sighs swelling and falling in its breast. The basket trembled from his heavy steps, but the child did not stir, and he moved boldly closer to inspect the creature. Its nose twitched in a wedge of sunlight, pink and translucent, and his first thought was that he could count the blood cells surging through its little body if only he held it toward the sky. But he must ask Ma for permission. He slipped out the backdoor, careful not to wake the baby, and found his mother kneeling in the garden, cutting hyacinths.

"Ma, what is that in there?" he asked.

She looked up, wiping her temple with a muddied glove. "What did you say?"

"The baby? The little baby in the kitchen? Can I touch it?"

It seemed odd that Ma would not know about a stranger living in the house. She knew about most things, how frogs could hop across lily pads without falling off or how many nickels were in a dollar. She must know about this. Then again, it was quite hot today – could he have simply dreamt up the whole thing? Please let there be a real baby in the kitchen, he did not want to be crazy. Ma smiled at him. No, he was not crazy.

"That's your sister," she said. "You can touch her, but you have to be gentle."

"Sister?" The word sounded to him like *moon* or *China*, the words that had dozens of colorful pictures in his children's encyclopedia, but that he could not convince himself actually existed. He lived in America, which was on the planet Earth. Sure, he watched the moon from his window at night, but what did that prove? He had also watched a film where cats played trumpet, but he could tell that was supposed to be funny. And if you searched the children's

encyclopedia for *Michael*, you would not find any pictures of sisters. So this was something different for him.

"Sister?" he said, for the second time. "Well, what do we call it, Ma?"

"Lucy," she said. "We call her Lucy." And, in this way, the boy never did question, and his mother never revealed, how a baby girl wound up in their home a week before Easter in the spring of his eighth year.

Michael returned to the kitchen and carved a thick piece of jellyroll to celebrate the news. If Ma told him this was his sister, then who was he to say otherwise? He had seen drawings of a woman in school, some in science books, some in the crude scribbling of the older boys, but the endless contortions of tubes left him flustered and the secret to how babies went from belly to kitchen remained elusive. Once Ma had sung him a lullaby and he became very sleepy, and Ma said she had sung the same tune whenever he squirmed inside her. But she never did sing to her belly, not that he saw, and besides, he liked to sing, why wouldn't she have asked him to sing to the baby? He had heard a Russian fairytale in class where children grow in the ground like turnips, and whenever a mother wants a baby, she plucks one from the soil and takes it home. That would explain why Ma had never gotten plump. Was his new sister Russian?

He peered again into the basket. What did a baby Russian look like? She was rather unremarkable and he hoped that, if he must have a sister, she might grow more hair soon or risk being mistaken for a boy, which he admitted he had done. Her mouth was toothless, though she seemed to him quite large, more a trout than a turnip. He mashed the jellyroll with his tongue, trying to imagine how it would be to lose all his teeth, and blew a sweet stream of air in her face. She frowned, drowsy and sullen, rubbing her eyes with tiny fists, then awoke blinking.

"Hello, Lucy," he said. "Lucy, Lucille."

Michael plastered a lump of cream on her lips and felt embarrassed that he did not know what more to say, having forever ignored the pages about *Russia* in the children's encyclopedia. The cream melted slowly down her chin. He liked babies, but they remained mostly puzzles to him, what with their lithe snake bodies and mysterious protests. She explored his face with slate-colored eyes, her forehead wrinkled in concentration, and he pondered how she observed the world: pure curiosity, few distinctions but for bright and sallow, loud and soft, big and bigger. At least, that is how he believed she must perceive things. For instance, now a huge being that rumbled the earth when it moved had ripped her from her nest and poised her above its head, threatening to eat her up.

His mother staggered into the kitchen balancing a fresh bouquet and an iron watering can, both of which she dumped in the sink as she saw him. "Christ! Michael put her down!" He laid the baby back in the basket and quickly shuffled away. "What were you thinking?"

What could he possibly say?

"I wanted to see its blood," he said. She had picked up the child and cradled it against her chest, and at these words, her eyes blackened. It was a very bad answer. Ma thought he had wished to harm the baby. He must try again. "The light is so yellow, I just wanted to see what its blood looked like on the inside. I mean the sunshine. With the blood. I didn't think it was so bad!" His mouth had begun to quiver and he could not continue. The green finally returned to his mother's eyes. He had done something bad, but she had already forgiven him.

"It's all right, okay?" she said. "But you have to get that babies break very easily. If you aren't careful, you'll hurt them without meaning to. Look at her. Look at how much she trusts us, the innocent little darling. She doesn't even know enough to be afraid." Somehow, this idea

struck him as profound, in a sense he could not express. *Too innocent to be afraid*. Many things frightened him, and that fact must reflect something of which he was not yet aware.

Lucy now writhed in her basket, as his mother leaned at the sink filling a glass bowl with water. She grasped a pair of garden shears, cropped the flowers in a single slice, and placed them in the bowl, raising it to the windowsill. Then she rattled the watering can into the sink upon a heap of dishes and spoke to him over her shoulder.

"I've got to work tonight."

"But the baby! –"

"I know about the baby, for Christ's sake!" Michael cringed at the hollowness of her voice. What happened to the kind, forgiving Ma of a moment ago? She was scraping lasagna off a pan with her thumbnail. "I've got to work tonight. You'll look after Lucy, understand?"

"Why?"

"Did I invent mortgages? Did I invent grocery bills? Did I invent my own kid getting too wide for his clothes every six goddamn months? No, I actually did not. That's why I work."

"No, Ma, I mean –"

"You're her brother, all right?" she said. "Who better than her brother?"

*

Michael was alone. The sound of his mother's engine faded in the distance, the sodium lamps began to burn in the street, and it was not long before the house was filled of gloam. He checked the sleeping child, still in her basket, and went out the front of the house, closing the door gently behind him. Lucy had groused and bickered the whole time Ma had tried to feed her, ruining all of suppertime, and Michael had become exhausted very quickly. Ma had even forgotten to ask

after his clarinet practice! He would pretend to be asleep when she arrived home that night and refuse to kiss her if she woke him.

Standing on the lawn, he smelled the cool grass and shut his eyes. He wished grass tasted sweeter so that he might chew it like a buttery piece of caramel. There was grass everywhere, so let there be sweets for everyone! Except in the desert, there was no grass. But perhaps they did not like sweets very much in the desert. But everyone liked sweets, everyone he knew, at least. He loved caramel, and he loved the smell of grass, and he loved all the things he loved. He loved his friend Ginny, who now came running to him, barefoot, from down the street.

"Michael," she said breathlessly, "there are candles all along the river. I'm not sure why, maybe for the boy who drowned last year. We must go, if only to look. Come."

"I want to, but there's a baby," he said, smiling, "and it belongs to us." He led her to the kitchen where the child slept, proud to show Ginny such an excellent surprise. She was a whole thirteen months older, and he did not have the chance to impress her very often. "Where did it come from?" she asked. He honestly did not know. "Well, it's only candles and it's not so far. Let's bring her, too."

They walked toward the river, Michael struggling with the basket, Ginny carrying a fatly folded blanket. A soft glow rose over the water as they neared the bank. Small candles, each in a paper bag, lined the river on both sides, like pearls along a throat. The light was growing grey and dim so that Michael could see only the lovely brown of Ginny's chin, cast in a shimmering orange shade. The two of them, and sleeping Lucy, continued against the current to where the ground was higher and they could view the drops of fire more clearly. Michael, as he passed, looked at the candle wax that brimmed and cupped in the sand of each bag, forming little coins of white or blue. They stumbled up a small hill, found an empty patch of grass, and Ginny

spread the blanket across the wet ground. Michael set the basket in the twisted roots of a tree a few meters behind them, satisfied that it would not roll away and, if it should, not too very far.

He and Ginny sat together, watching the faint, flickering light. Below them, a small knot of people gathered, each bearing a candlestick wreathed in paper, their backs turned to the wind. One woman kept dabbing her eyes with the sleeves of her sweater, and Michael feared the candle would slip from her hand and burn her clothes. On the opposite bank, a football ricocheted down a hill, plopping in the water as a scrawny teenage boy followed, fishing it out with a branch and a laugh. Beyond the ring of candlelight, an older man gazed at the passing current, mesmerized, his hands clasped across his stomach.

"It's such a sad thing," said Ginny. "He was only two grades ahead." Michael nodded, murmuring in assent. Who were those people? The boy's family, he figured. He pinched his nostrils shut and held his breath for a full minute. He did not want to drown. He did not want to die, not ever in his life, but he especially did not want to drown. What if he went swimming and the undertow snatched him? What if he thrashed and cried, but everyone thought he was only waving? I'm drowning, not waving, I'm drowning! Ma would know, and she would jump in to save him. But Lucy! What if Ma did not know, what if she did not notice? The thought of such fatal confusion made his heart weak with terror. He meant to ask if they found the boy's body, but he did not want to upset Ginny. He was sure they must have. It was not a very fast river. But look how beautiful it was in the candlelight! The water came in soft curls against the bank.

Still, it was such a sad thing.

"Listen," Ginny said, looking sidewise at him, "has your nose grown?"

"In my whole life or just today?"

"Since we've been sitting here."

She crawled alongside him, pressing their cheeks together. "I don't think so," she said, "but I really can't see." She squeezed his cheeks between her palms and rotated his head so their noses met at the tips and their mouths each made one-half of a whole. Her skin felt warm against his own, like a cooling loaf of bread. No, his nose had not grown an inch. The fluttering of her eyelashes tickled his face and he began to giggle. Ginny sighed, sliding away.

"You dope, your face tastes like jelly."

The bodies below glowed in a circle, the lone shadow of the man unlit. The air began to cool around them, as a bold crack of thunder split the night and long drops fell upon the earth. The rain thickened, while he and Ginny balled up the blanket and descended the hill. Michael, through the dimness, saw the wet paper bags caving in, smothering the flames and the sand and the little blue and white coins of wax. They ran together back toward the house, between houses and over fences, tripping and smiling through the mud. Ginny lifted the hem of her dress from a puddle, and he saw the white softness of her leg.

They had romped for a full mile when Michael remembered the basket and the poor little creature asleep within it. "I've forgotten her," he said, and it tasted so foul that he said it again to wash the awful savor from his tongue. "I've forgotten my sister." The pair hurried back through black pools to the tree where Lucy shivered. He swaddled her in the blanket and lurched down the slope, cursing himself.

Finally home and warm, the child lay bound in a heavy quilt on the sofa. Ginny combed her soggy hair with her fingers, flicking the droplets on the floor. "Close shave," she whispered, looking at the basket, and Michael had trouble swallowing because she was right. He tried to screw his mouth in a funny face to please the baby, but his lips quaked too much and he scowled instead. Had he ever done worse things than this? He once told Ma he was sick to miss Mass

when really he just wanted to remain in bed to admire the fresh snow from his window. But he had confessed, and Father Pat had laughed and absolved him. And wasn't it only weeks ago he had pinched Ginny's arm for a joke and made her squeal in pain? She was not mad with him, only startled that he had snuck up. The memory hurt his heart. Perhaps this was not the worst thing.

Ginny and he drank milk in the kitchen, listening to the rain throb in the leaves. He felt a vague impulse to apologize, though he knew not what to say, and instead kept silent, taking his milk in rapid, breathless gulps, while Ginny drew figures of flying birds in the mist of her glass. At last, she slipped her feet in her shoes and rose from the table with a feline yawn. "I think the rain's just about stopped. I'd better go home." She smiled to raise his spirits. "You shouldn't worry, Michael, okay?" They said goodnight, then she whisked out into the darkness.

Michael stood in silence. He rinsed the empty glasses in the sink, thinking of how the pools of milk were like the coins of wax, only that wax hardened into little discs and milk grew sour and scummy. That was just the short, round candles, though. Ma's candlesticks melted down the towers like long, braided ropes, and he broke them into pieces if they cooled, or else rolled the wax into little balls with his thumb and fingers. His fingers turned dark red and green. Those were nice colors that made him think of pinecones and Christmas and of his two aunts who brought chocolates for him in their big sweater pockets, and he was still far away in thought when a peculiar sound blistered the quiet.

The child was crying.

It was, in the beginning, a string of dry snorts, as if the air was filled with cotton, but fell soon into a rhythm of swells and snarls, hot and angry and wet. It was the most sorrowful thing he had ever heard, a creature bereft of the warm womb, adrift in a strange, new land. What could

be the reason? Michael had let her be, thinking his presence might distress her, and when Ginny tightened the quilt, the babe could barely crack her eyelids, so warm and tired she must have felt. Now something had changed. His nerves ached like the plucked wires of a harp.

Afraid she was hurt, sick, soiled, Michael poked about for sores, stroked her cheeks for fever, ensured that she was clean. He turned her on her belly, he held her in his arms. He sang old nursery songs, cooing to her as Ma had to him. He guessed she had not eaten for hours and plundered the kitchen, offering sauces and syrups and sweets, but nothing could slake her wrath. Michael felt sleepy and beaten, not so much a brother as a jester, and a very poor one even then. Lucy whimpered and grouched, calling for him when he left and scolding him when he came. What a little bully, he thought, what a little heathen, holding him prisoner in his own home. How could that possibly be? Then again, maybe the problem had less to do with being a baby and more to do with being a girl. Ginny was a girl. She could run faster than he could, that was true, though once she had spilled off a fence at the orchard, and then there had been tears! He slipped down the slope after her only to find she had scraped her knee, nothing more. But how could he tell her to quit crying when she was hurt? Too much softness – that was the problem. Ma was not soft and she never cried. But just look at how Ginny howled when he pinched her arm. And her arms were very soft.

How had this happened? How had the baby become their burden? Had Ma discovered a basket in the reeds along the river and adopted the child herself? Were there even reeds along the river? What exactly was a reed? And what about the Russian turnips? Michael wanted to weep himself. There was so much he did not know! About space travel and China and money, about babies and reeds and his mother. Who was she? Was he even her son? He hated Lucy for making him think such terrible things, hated her for wrecking his quiet life and humiliating him

with Ginny and for the harsh way Ma spoke to him, for making him feel like such a bad brother, a great fool, maybe even an orphan. Yesterday, everything had been perfect. Today everything was wrong, wrong, wrong!

The cries were shriller than ever. He stamped his feet and clapped his hands, shouting "Shh!" for as long as he could, causing her to flinch when he crept near. "You've got to go," Michael told her, though he was uncertain how he would force her to leave. He was not a cruel boy, and he knew babies needed proper care. He just wanted to her to vanish as quickly and easily as she had come. "If I leave you in the garden," he said, "you'll just sit there like a slug. You're dumber than a baby piglet. But if I leave you on a bus or in the train station, someone bad might snatch you up. That won't do either." What choice did he have? "I don't think you asked to come here, but I can't stand it any longer." He went out to the garden.

Through the windows, he could still hear her cries. If this was a test, he had failed, and if it was a trap, he surrendered. She could stay, she could stay, he finally conceded, just please stop the tears! He picked petals from his mother's flowers, tossing them in the grass, and his pants grew damp from the dirt. How long he sat in the garden, he did not know, but soon rain fell again in great, fat drops, forcing him back into the house. Lucy remained on the sofa, wriggling free of the quilt, and he sank alongside her. The sounds were now purely of her throat, measured and metrical, no wetness left.

Michael folded the quilt around her belly. "I'm sorry I forgot you," he said. "But you don't need to punish me like this. Even brothers forget, if that's what I am."

Yet his sincerity made no difference to the child. He tried to focus on other things to blot out the noise. If she could not go and he refused to go, then he would have to take his mind elsewhere. What about the time he had visited his cousins in Michigan? They owned a big boat.

There were many pebbles around the lake, white and smooth. Pick up a fistful, let it drop, and it sounded like rain – at least, that is what his cousins claimed. But he liked to pick up only two pebbles, a big and a little, and hit them together. Then it sounded like a frog chirping. What a nice sound. There were no sounds like that where he lived. Except for when Ma woke him with the sound of the tap filling the watering can in the garden. He liked the metallic sound of it, he liked to think of crumpling metal like a ball of paper.

There was the answer! Ma had left the watering can in the sink. He could turn on the water and not have to listen to the cries anymore. Maybe he would leave the faucet running all night and finally sleep. Maybe the sink would leak over and flood the house, the water sweeping Lucy away to some nice, new family's doorstep. That wouldn't be his fault, would it?

He went to the sink and twisted the knobs, the can filling with soft, tinkling music, like liquid sleigh bells. The water crisply flowed, and he thought how it came from the sea, through the pipes in the ground and into his house. No, the water came from the lake, from Lake Michigan. Or the other lake, the bigger one? Or the ocean? He smiled, thinking how he once feared fishes pouring from the tap. Was he scared of a fish swimming in his teacup, or worried that the little fishes might be lost? A little bit of both, probably.

What was this?

He realized that the crying had ceased. And not just briefly, but for a while – the can was nearly full. Michael peered toward the sofa to find Lucy studying the ceiling, quiet. Yes! He had won! Patience had prevailed, as he knew it would. He felt lighter than when he had mistakenly rung the bell before Father Fitzwilliam unveiled the chalice and a girl in the front pew had snorted, but then Father Pat said that Christ had wept and Christ had hungered and, he was sure, Christ himself must have messed up a bell or two. What a decent thing to say, Michael

wondered. Fumbling with the knobs, he shut off the water and danced back into the den. But no sooner had the stream stopped and Michael left the kitchen did Lucy resume her cries, this time hotter and noisier than before.

The boy could not believe it. How does such a tiny animal have such strength? He was confused and saddened. Perhaps it was a matter of expectations. After all, he had not meant to make her quit, only to cover one sound with another so that he might sleep. He turned on the water again and prepared for bed. In the bathroom, brushing his teeth, he could hear the water spilling over the edge of the can, swirling down the drain, back into the lake. He dried his mouth and went to the sofa, hauling a clump of pillows to build a cradle for the intruder.

Again she had stopped! Lucy was squirming and blinking, laughing (at him!), as the tap softly roared in the kitchen. He threw the pillows to the floor and raced to the sink, shutting the knobs and scrambling back to confront her. She was already whining by the time he regained his feet, having slipped on the slick tile. "You're playing a game with me," he accused, "and I don't like it!" Michael rubbed his sore knees. "You did this to me! I'd never have had to run like a goose if you weren't here!" But the child took no notice, she merely squinted and moaned.

He blundered out the backdoor, blind with fury, and thought of running into the night, away from the child, away from his home, away from Ginny, away, away! Away from Ma too, he supposed. Oh, but he could never leave Ma! He looked to the clouded stars and felt the rain cool upon his cheeks. Water tumbled from the sky and rushed through the pipes and pooled in his eyes, some sweet, some salty, but all water, yet he felt himself alone in this world, a part of no tide. Of course, he was not quite alone. There was the child, the little creature who might as well have seeped up from the ground like hot black tar he could not ignore. Michael summoned himself back to the moment, wiped his face with his sleeves, and listened to the droplets drum

the earth. The sound calmed him. He twisted to see her through the glass, the crier, the serpent. The quilt had unswathed itself, winding to the floor. It was strange, he reflected, how she stayed still in the rain, yet cursed him when he tried to warm her bones. From where do children come? Do they call the ungracious there mild?

His blood was sick, his mind forlorn. He wanted peace and to be peaceful, he wanted the warmth of kinship and, if not that, then only quiet and a lightened heart. He saw himself from without in the wet, dim gloom, the rain heavy upon his clothes and murmurous in the air. He imagined the soft coils of water trickling from the can in the garden and the foamy water cleft by a big boat, and wished he were a globe of dew to drink or to dry or to be taken back by the sun. Instead, he was a boy, and boyhood was quite tough. The rain beat against his brow and he slouched back into the kitchen to seize the watering can, emptying it into the flowerbed where his footprints had been. He wondered, as he returned to the sink, when Ma would come home and if the despair was plain upon his face. She would ask why was Lucy crying and he not in bed, and he would have to tell the whole story of the candles and the rain and all his awful thoughts of abandoning the one for whom no one else could better care. Those were her words.

Elbows upon the kitchen table, Michael listened to the echo of the rain, the soft thumps of the untightened tap. The dark rain pounded and the light drops rang. The rain and the tap, the rain and the tap, the rain and the tap, the tuneful sound of water. He looked up to gaze out the window, then turned toward the sink. The rain growled in the dark; the water chimed in the can. He saw the little figure squirming on the sofa from where he sat, a presence almost completely detached from the noise, and walked warily to the door. He gripped the knob and drew it open, the sweet drops blowing through the grass, rattling the birdfeeder, spraying his face. The cries faded. He shut the door and the whimpering began anew, as he stepped to the sink with the

muffled sound of rain still in his ears. The water came in a long, smooth rush, bursting in the bottom of the can, resonating up the metal chamber. Michael went to the baby.

He raised her aloft, slowly, quietly, his eyes upon hers, her cheeks close to his. The pink smell of soft new skin, milk and powder, golden oil soap lingering in her light hair, filled up his senses. She was silent, blinking, unafraid. He spoke to her in whispered tones. He told her of how he pitched rotten apples in the orchard, how he once fed a horse bran from his palm, how he had worried of fishes splashing in his cup. He explained why frogs never did slip from their lily pads, as best he could, and how the moon revolved around the Earth. He talked of Ginny and of Ma, of the wonderful life he shared with them. He unpeeled the quilt, felt her little ribs in his hands, cradled her to the tap.

He warmed the water.

He bathed his sister.

*

Vines

I HAD BARELY tasted blood when I knew something had gone wrong. My head felt stuffed with cork and dirty linen and, in the distance, perhaps up the staircase, I heard a faint groaning, such that I wondered if I should not drag myself from the ground to investigate the possible presence of an intruder. But I had cracked my skull hard, and I soon realized that the noise came from my own throat, thick and grainy and hoarse. So there was no need to rise right away. What the heck had happened? I hauled myself upright and saw that the room had changed entirely since I left for school that morning. The bookshelf stood against a different wall, the sofa faced the front window, and the coffee table lay smashed and splintered at my bruising hip. This might mean one of two things: either I had stumbled into the wrong house with identical furnishings during some somnambulist misadventure, or else my mother had received some rather upsetting news. Since I quickly recognized the punched-out windowpane shielded with a thin flap of cardboard (hockey stick, wizardry), it must surely be the latter. A rusty tang filled my mouth.

In those days, my mother had the disquieting habit of moving the furniture into new and unusual formations whenever she experienced an anxiety attack that clear liquor could not cure, and for the next few weeks, I would have to grope my path to the sink in the night if I wanted a simple glass of tap water. To me, the magnitude of the changes was inscrutable, detached from whatever worried her at the time. While a threatening letter from the bank might only result in the rug rotating ninety degrees, I had once seen her push everything from the center of the room after she could not decide whether to re-paint the door of the utility closet. We danced together in the bare space. Even still, I thought it unfortunate to position a coffee table in the middle of the floor, no matter the level of her concern.

Finally, feeling less dazed and even fortified by all the blood I had swallowed, I picked myself up and went to the bathroom to wash and inspect the damage. It was not too bad, I was sorry to see. I had bitten my tongue and scraped my chin, though neither wound was visible, and the ache in my knee produced a limp that a neutral observer would perceive less as hobbled and more as jaunty, in fact, practically sporting. A woolly coat of blood had begun to dry across my teeth, which repulsed me, and I brushed them clean. Afterward, with my chin tilted at a normal angle, no one could tell I had just had my legs slashed by my mother's charming whimsy.

None of which was good, I hasten to add. The coffee table had belonged to my paternal grandmother, a dour individual, based on her photograph, whom I had never had the misery of meeting, but a lady for whom my mother retained a curious reverence, nonetheless. A sore chin, nullified by the unusually jolly spring in my step, would not inspire enough sympathy, let alone genuine pity, for my mother to forgive the broken antique, let alone apologize to me for her own neglect. For a moment, I explored the technical points of flinging myself down the stairs, but that risked only more damage to home and, more to the point, hearth, that is, me. Of course, sustaining a non-mortal injury was the goal. But I did not like pain, only the indulgences that followed in its wake, and, as I grew older, I began to suspect that I was somewhat of a coward.

I combed my fingers through my hair, unclumping tufts of sweat and mud, and saw blood stained upon my hands. Had I somehow achieved the very elusive head wound *sans* major brain trauma? I mean, I could not know if the impact had concussed me, but my synapses were firing so rapidly trying to figure out how to leverage this discovery into not only kisses of forgiveness, but also possibly a television set for my bedroom as well, that I felt things were probably not too scrambled upstairs. I held up my mother's small vanity mirror behind my head to examine the gash in its reflection, raking apart my hair, then frowned, finding nothing. There was no wound;

the blood on my fingers was only from my clotted tongue. Any resultant migraines, dizziness, or tumors because of the fall would only add insult to illusory injury.

Still before the mirror, I shifted my gaze from cranium to countenance. And what exactly did I see? Sticky flecks of gore around my lips, a rivulet of pus trickling along my jawline, a yellow bruise above my left eye from the previous day when I fallen from my bicycle while rocketing over a patch of slick leaves. I scowled, then I smiled. I had a nice smile, I believed. People often said so to me. Some people did. At eleven years old, the cream-filled softness of my face suggested that the babyish pounds from holidays past had finally congealed into what my orthodontist and my khakis termed a "husky" build. Once my mother had merrily described a friend of hers as looking like "Cary Grant with a drop of Hebrew," and when I asked whom I resembled, she chose Roscoe Arbuckle, putting aside the homicide charge for a moment, because of my, ahem, screwy sense of humor. I cried in the bathtub that night because I loved *North by Northwest* more than any other film – Eva Marie Saint, mercy! – and because who alive doesn't wish he looked like Cary Grant?

My mother's mirror remained in my hand, and I lifted it again near my cheek so I could glimpse the reflection of my face in the smaller glass. The part in my hair swept the opposite direction, the way the rest of the world saw me. *Hello, it's Me, You. Oh, excellent. I thought I seemed familiar. I say, like what You've done with Our hair*. I retracted the mirror a few inches to capture the back of my scalp, mesmerized by the endless, recursive, slowly minimizing smiles on my faces. They went on and on, extending to eternity, and it seemed to me that in the time it would require for the reflections to exhaust themselves and finally stop, I would be old, then dead, then skinless, boneless, faceless, all the while my dumb eleven-year-old-self kept smiling for millennia and beyond in some awful, glassy dimension where images never perished. It was

an ugly thought and I shuddered. Then I heard the sound of the lock tumbling and my mother walking in the house.

"…maryandjoseph!" she cried, as I slowly limped into the room, the fragments of our former coffee table silent and accusing in a heap before her, mixed with blood and spit and not a few tears. She gripped a spindly table leg in one hand like a truncheon, and I knotted my mouth in a grimace to convey the lone bodily damage present in the room. She was not looking at me. "What happened here?"

"Hi," I said, through tightened lips. "Oh, this?"

If she stared at the rubble any longer, I risked the tide of memory and schmaltz would start burbling and rising within her, and even if she felt badly about my injuries, she would still spend half the evening weeping softly in her bedroom. All of which would be like losing a wrongful death suit after a triumphant acquittal for murder. I coughed loudly, trying to angle my chin toward her.

She peeped up. Fortunately, other than brushing my teeth, I had hardly cleaned myself. Pus and plasma from the incipient scab made my chin gummy and gross, and I prepared to sob if the moment demanded it. Evidently, she could see the watery fear in my eyes, and she came to me, squashing my cheeks in her plump hands, studying the raw scrape. "And what's happened *here*? This?" She pointed to the table. I nodded, mouth quivering.

My mother's eyes wandered the room, maybe confused about how all the furniture had moved, a judgment brewing in her dark irises. I absolutely should have tossed myself down the stairs, I thought, arse over teakettle, a complete commitment to absolving myself. It was too late now to improve my condition. After what seemed like a long minute, she sighed, clumsily fixed my hair, and said, "Well, let's not get too hung up about it, all right?" Ignoring the insinuation

that I was the one who might need consoling, I bowed my head in agreement. I would survive, and I was thankful. "Anyhow," she said, addressing the fractured table leg in her hand, "there's someone coming tomorrow and this place is a disaster. You're a disaster. Now go wash up."

I went to the bathroom to smear ointment on my chin, my stride jaunty and light, full of cheer for my fate and for having such a benevolent mother. It was funny how one crisis usurped another, as my mind turned to wondering who might be visiting us, and why his or her presence had inspired my mother to behave as she did. Furniture and mercy? Tomorrow I would find out. A fresh bandage, the scent of medicine, and I returned to the living room, nearly killing myself on the sideboard my mother had only just pushed into the hallway.

*

He came in the morning bearing a green leather suitcase and box of sweets, his hat blown nearly off his head. The wind gently whipped the belt of his raincoat as he stooped to greet my mother, who made a small noise in her throat and stepped out of the house, not knowing or not caring that her nightgown had fallen half-open. They were both getting wet. I stood in the front hall, stirring rainwater with my foot, trying to recite the alphabet backwards, as my mother took the suitcase from his hand and led him inside. For a moment, he seemed stunned, lost in the dimness of the house. The naked bulb of the hallway made everything sallow and shadowed. The door remained unclosed to the storm, and as I looked down at his boots, plastered with leaves, a quick slash of light brightened our faces. He beat the rain from his hat, kissed my mother on the cheek, and offered me his hand. I should call him Leland.

They moved to the kitchen and I followed, skipping over his gritty footprints. My mother placed the kettle on the stove and searched the cupboard for an uncracked teacup. Finding none, she pulled a thick coffee mug from the shelf and a jar of dark jam from the pantry, filled a bowl

with hot water, and sank the jar within. Then she laid out a loaf of bread, three hard-boiled eggs, and a few pieces of spiced sausage. The smell of the food summoned me to the kitchen table, though I resisted, and the man called Leland turned toward me and smiled.

Looking away, he watched my mother from along the wall, crimping the brim of his hat in his hands, his little green suitcase deflated, drooping against him. He was a small man with small, horny hands and cracked lips, not very well shaven, but still handsome, the kind of looks meant not to attract women, but crowds, the masses, the well-oiled features of a carnival barker or escape artist, perhaps even a good one. Still, he seemed fragile and old, timid. Based on what my mother had described, which was nothing more than a charcoal sketch, I thought he would be taller, the man who once worked for the railroad and wrestled at Marquette before the army took him to Vietnam. Maybe he only used the radio in the war, no guns, and shoveled coal on the locomotives. To be honest, I was not sure if trains even still operated on coal, but it seemed like the only logical explanation. Unless he was a liar, which I was not prepared to rule out.

The kettle had begun to cry. My mother lifted it from the burner, sloshed water in the mug, and dropped in a bag to brew. We had no sugar, she said. That was all right with him. He kept watching, silently, a pool of raindrops forming at his feet. After a minute, she brought the tea to the table on a chipped little saucer and extracted the jam from its bath. The ink of the label – BOYSENBERRY PLUM – bled off the paper, turning the water grey and cloudy.

"What's that?" the man called Leland said.

"To heat it up," my mother said.

"Yes, of course."

He drew out a chair and placed the box of sweets upon the table. My mother cut a big lump of bread from the loaf and spread on a spoonful of jam. She passed it across the table, and

he devoured it in two swift bites. "Didn't they feed you in there?" she said. He shrugged and went on eating, sloppy with his little hands, such lupine greed that it seemed less hunger and more sport. I remained in the hall, inspecting him from behind, catching the bemused, washed out look on my mother's face. She asked how the bus ride from Oshkosh had been, and he said that the roads were fast and slick, no real problems to speak of, but it was white-knuckle for a spell.

"I wish you'd come gotten me, Mo," he said, "but this fine jelly makes up for it."

She smiled and told him he could sleep upstairs in the empty bedroom, fresh sheets, fresh soap, the hot water valve was mistakenly installed on the right, I can loan you a little money, stay as long as you need. He thanked her, his eyes cast downward, picking off the sodden label from the jar of jam and crumpling it up. Then he became a little teary, and said, "Jesus, what is it with me today? Maureen, I owe you. You're a saint. This house is just a block south of paradise for me." He blew his nose in my mother's cloth napkin and reached over the table to take her hand in his own. "And this jelly!"

At this point, I blundered into the kitchen and said, in a voice I thought expressed both suspicion and juvenile curiosity, lest someone accuse me of being suspicious:

"Who are you supposed to be?"

"Don't be thick," my mother said.

"I'm not. She says you're our family, but I don't believe it. I've never heard of you."

"He *is* family and you *are* being thick. He's our family, he's staying with us, and you'd better get acquainted now because I'm at the hospital again tonight."

"Why?"

"Can't you ever give me a break?"

"Family," the man called Leland said, his back to me. "It's a fever in the blood."

"An honest explanation," I said. "Finally."

They spent the afternoon murmuring at the kitchen table, my mother serving coffee and rhubarb pie and a platter of cold cuts, Leland eating everything, smearing horseradish on the coat he had not yet removed. I loathed thinking of my Saturday ruined by the arrival of a strange man, family or not, who had imposed himself upon us, my mother scrambling to wash linens and vacuum the bedroom, flush away the bottles she stored above the refrigerator. Thus, I retreated to the living room, content to read in the quiet embrace of an autumn rainstorm tapping against the windowpanes. What stray parts of their conversation I did hear, though I told myself I had no interest, came in jumbled little splinters, my mother's faint voice tense as the skin of a drum. "I haven't seen that crowd…well, he's a bit prickly at this age…if she hasn't gone, she'll be in school, I'll bet…no phone calls, no letters, nothing." Soon, however, her tone lightened and I stopped listening as best I could help.

That night, after my mother had gone from the house, Leland found me straining by the failing light outside the window. He had the box of sweets, chocolates and raspberry shortbread, and I forced myself to refuse on principle – I had seen a television program about Halloween candy poisoned with tasteless toxins; I could be dead in minutes and never know it. Even so, they looked delicious, and when he munched a chocolate himself, I finally relented.

"Is that by Bainbridge?" he said, pointing to the thick book I held in my hands, the cover richly illustrated with a pride of lions stalking outside a bazaar. "He's just wonderful, isn't he? Among my old favorites, that's for sure."

"What?"

I was struggling with the caramel mortared to the roof of my mouth.

"*The Joys and Perils of Orson Stewart Briggs*," he said. "I read so much by Bainbridge when I was around your age, and even younger, it made me wish I was marooned on a desert island myself. It seems silly to me now, but what have you."

He had confused me. Orson Stewart Briggs was a celebrated naturalist who rejected his life of British peerage in pursuit of adventure, whisking around the world in his hot air balloon to discover unknown flora and fauna. He had vaguely meant to visit Istanbul and its surrounding lands, but in the third week of his journey, having passed from London to Marseilles and over the bright veins of Tripoli, an awful tempest blew him from his course and he crashed in the mysterious interior of the African continent, his balloon shredded and his head badly wounded. Luckily, the uncivilized nomadic peoples who found him barely alive treated his injuries and gave him shelter. But when he awoke, he suffered from low-grade amnesia, the details of his crash lost, but the memory of his life in England still faintly intact. The savages provided vellum and quill pens with which he composed his diary while he convalesced, relating the experience of oblivion in a foreign land. Only posthumously was the manuscript recovered. He never came home to Europe. I had just reached the part where Briggs recounts how the daughter of the tribal chief steals a handful of figs to express her love for him, despite their tragically different cultures. The crime had been exposed and the girl disgraced, and the chief now threatened to expel her from the tribe, condemning her to certain death. I did not welcome this disturbance from Mr. Leland.

"What are you saying?" I said. "Who is Bainbridge?"

"Bainbridge, the author, the man who wrote the book."

"Orson Stewart Briggs wrote the book. These are his joys and his perils, see?"

He laughed. “Yes, yes, of course. That’s my mistake. Like GOD, the author must remain invisible, above and beyond, trimming his fingernails. Odd how I remember the words of that Irish gasbag. Still, that’s the magic of reading, I suppose.” He left the box of sweets on the arm of my chair and slowly went up the staircase, breathing quite heavily.

I was troubled as I mumbled my chocolate. What did a man named Bainbridge have to do with anything? With a name like that, I pictured a fat clerk who counted his coins with greasy little hands, probably wearing a powdered wig that smelled of mothballs, the naked carcass of a devoured chicken at his elbow and a huge wart waiting to be lanced pulsing on his nose. A man like that could not write such stories, he must spend too much time supervising barrels of sour beer along a dirty river somewhere. Besides, on the very first page of the book, it stated that Orson Stewart Briggs himself had composed the tales within, his papers salvaged from the remains of an abandoned convoy in the desert. What had happened to the tribespeople or to Briggs, no one ever knew.

So that much was clear. But why did Leland insist that this man Bainbridge had been involved? And how could someone as slovenly as Bainbridge surely was be like GOD, above and beyond, desperately needing to cut his fingernails? Nothing made sense to me. If I had to guess, I figured that after the manuscript returned to London, through fate or negligence, Bainbridge had been responsible for ensuring that the work was properly bound and published. He was a caretaker, that was all, a kind of friend to Briggs determined to see that boys like me should have the chance to read of his adventures. So perhaps Bainbridge was not the worst person, after all.

These thoughts had distracted me from my reading, and I no longer could concentrate on what would become of the chief’s beautiful daughter. I turned to the front cover again to study the lions and the bright colors of the market in the distance beyond them. Lions like that would

have no problem eating a man like Bainbridge, or like stupid Leland, for that matter. He could barely climb the stairs without wheezing! I would have to find a book about lions after I finished with Orson Stewart Briggs. Then I leafed to the final page of the book, which was blank, and flicked back to the previous one, which had a small black-and-white photograph of a man, who, impossibly, did not wear a wig. The text explained that his name was Myron J. Bainbridge, the author of such beloved children's classics as *The Strange Voyage of Orson Stewart Briggs* and *Briggs and Other Adventures* and *The Florin and the Lady*. Like his celebrated protagonist, Bainbridge had once been styled the Earl of Carlisle, while maintaining an amateur interest in ornithology throughout his life. Whatever that was. I shut the book and put it down.

And so Orson Stewart Briggs was really only the invention of some man who spent his days wandering around an estate, trying to marry off his daughters, talking down to poor peasant farmers. I had been duped. In many ways, this was worse than a fat clerk conducting commerce. I would bet he had never even flown in a hot air balloon. What did the Earl of Carlisle know of forbidden romance in the desert? Only what he could think up in his in his bald head, sitting in his castle a thousand miles away from Africa. When the stories were true, they were full of life, glowing and generous, gasping for breath, spilling colors across the sand of a real and true place. Now they seemed just ink and pulp, written in England, printed in England, shipped to America on a boat from England. If the boat sank and every book was lost at sea, all the stories would be gone with them. They existed in no man's memory, like the amnesiac Orson Stewart Briggs. Did any of the stories really matter, then? And if I knew that Bainbridge had written the tales, if he no longer floated invisibly beyond the book, what did that say about him, let alone me?

These were questions too big for an impatient little boy. It was far easier to grow angry. Leland should never have spoken up about the book, I thought. I wanted to scream through the

house like a hungry lion upon a well-stocked bazaar, find him sitting alone in his bedroom, tear the newspaper from his hands, and shout, you've wrecked everything, don't you understand! You've only been here one day, eight whole hours, and already everything's wrecked!

"Leland! A word, please!" I yelled, ready to pounce at the sound of his voice. There was no answer, the lucky fool.

In any case, such a full-scale brawl between "family" members might have upset my mother, and I saw nothing was wrecked once I counted to twenty. Besides, I was terribly curious to find out what became of the chief's daughter, the one with the smooth black hair who smiled whenever Briggs forgot her name, who pilfered sycamore figs to say what her tongue could not, who faced exile in the desert for her devotion to love. I picked up the book, found my page, and began to read. It was not such a bad story, all things considered.

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"Look at me, goddamn it."

Bill Hazel was jabbing me with the sharpened end of his pencil. I tried to focus my mind on the figures scrawled across the board, but the jabbing persisted.

"Look at me, you sack of shit." On nearly every occasion, I would tolerate such abuse. But my only other school shirt lay in the laundry hamper, still speckled with blood from the coffee table incident two weeks past, and pencil lead, when thrust into a fleshy shoulder, left nasty black craters in the cloth. I spun around.

"What, what is it?"

He grinned a stupid, bearish grin. "Would you poke Miss Hewitt?"

"How do you mean? In the stomach or something? Christ, no. She'd send me down the hall so fast – I wouldn't get home before five for a month. You can't poke a teacher in the gut."

"You are a child."

"No, shut up! Why exactly?"

Bill Hazel snorted. "Would you poke Miss Hewitt?" He made a lewd motion with his hands. I knew it was lewd because he then said, "I really would. I'd poke the shit out her." In my modest opinion, toilet matters should remain out of proper classroom conversation, and I went back to watching the board until he jabbed me a final time. I spun around again.

"Hazel," I said to him, a brief squall of spit showering his papers, "your face looks like a plate of mortal sins." I had heard my mother use this expression before in private, usually referring to the newborn babies foisted upon her by new mothers who thought they owed her something for shoving her hands inside them. It seemed appropriate in this context, too.

"What I want to know is," he said, leaning forward so that I could feel his humid breath coiling around my ear, "who's the guy poking your mother?"

I almost slapped him clean across the face out of pure surprise.

"What!"

His breath smelled like rancid lobster and mayo. "All I'm saying is, this guy comes to your house, eats up all your shit, and what? He jerks off all day? All I'm saying is that someone must be poking someone, or else why would your mother keep him around, right?"

The words hissed in my ears.

"You've got it all wrong. He's family. It's a fever in the blood, you know."

"Maybe, but probably not," he said, "unless he's your dad or something, which, I mean, come on, please. As for fevers, I've got a big one for Miss Hewitt. You know, in my shorts."

Leland's presence for last two weeks had made me ashamed of my temper. Whenever I found myself on the brink of shouting at my mother, his gloomy little eyes would embarrass me

and I would walk away mutely. As a result, my capacity for wrath had diminished, and all I could manage was:

"That's very cute, you…you huge imbecile!"

After school, Bill Hazel's words kept me from relishing the reds and the golds in the trees as I walked home. I had wondered if the reds and the golds tasted different, and the day before I had eaten a red, so today I meant to eat a gold, but now I had forgotten completely, thinking about Leland and my mother. It was not the poking business that bothered me; it was what Bill had said about Leland being my father. First, though I knew my mother enjoyed the company of men, I refused to believe she had done with any of them whatever was required to award the title of father. Second, for a long while, I had nurtured a rather refined creation myth about myself, an incongruous mix of being molded from my mother's rib and springing from her forehead, an eight-pound-fifteen-ounce lump of clay straight from her frontal cortex. The very word "father" never occurred to me. But now? There had to be a good reason why my mother had moved all the furniture. And Leland did sulk, inexplicably, when he saw my grandmother's coffee table in shambles. It could add up.

Yet I had not seen much of him those previous days. As I washed and dressed for school in the mornings, the light from his bedroom shone beneath the door, and when I came home, the door remained shut. The only evidence he had emerged during the day was the jam labels he peeled off, balled up, and left upon the kitchen table, our supply of fruit preserves dwindling to almost nothing within a single week. I could hear him quietly listening to his tiny AM/FM radio or coughing while I tried to sleep. My mother had evaded all my questions about how long he might stay, and I alternated between curiosity and outrage, searching his raincoat pockets and emptying his dresser drawers when he left the house. If he was my father, could I even tell?

But, instead, he seemed bored and boring, and the only time he spoke to me was after I had finished the Briggs book and replaced it on the shelf, when he asked if I might be interested in reading some more. I shrugged and the next afternoon a green hardcover with gold lettering appeared on my desk. Otherwise, the only noteworthy episode occurred when I found him lying prostrate on the kitchen table in a vain effort to cure some mysterious lumbar strain, his head pillowed by the folded classified section of the newspaper. He muttered something embarrassed, rose, and went upstairs. Is that what a father did?

How should I know.

A few hours later, he came upon me in my bedroom as I sat curved over a sheet of paper, pencil smudges and eraser shavings clinging to my hands. I had given him a distracted nod when I arrived home earlier, before leaping and fumbling up the staircase. He might have sensed my unease.

"What's that you're writing?"

"It's a story," I said, still scribbling.

"What kind of story? What's it about?"

I laid down my pencil. "If you must know, it takes place in the future, where people eat little candies that let them hear music. They're called Music Candies."

"Musical candies? That's a very clever story."

"No, *Music*. They're like the chalky little hearts you eat on Valentine's Day. And some play violin music, and some play guitar music, and others play church choirs singing. It depends on the candy, really."

"So what happens then?"

"Well," I said, "one day a man eats a Music Candy and nothing happens. He doesn't hear anything. At first, he thinks it must be broken, a bad candy, expired. But then he thinks, maybe he's listening to the music and he just doesn't know it. Maybe this piece of music has sixteen, thirty-two, one-hundred and twenty-eight bars of rest before the instruments begin. So he keeps listening and listening and listening, and nothing comes. The longer the silence, the surer the man is that he's waiting for the greatest piece of music ever written. He stops going to work, he stops kissing his wife, he stops taking baths, because what if the music starts and he isn't ready? He doesn't want to miss a note."

"Sure."

"Soon he spends all day sitting in a room with the curtains drawn, waiting, just waiting. The suspense is literally killing his body, but with every second, he's more and more excited. Years pass and he's still waiting."

I picked up the pencil and went on scribbling.

"And?" Leland said, his eyebrows arched.

"And what? Isn't it obvious? He goes crazy."

Leland stood gazing around the room, exhaling through his thin, pursed lips. My father, I thought, would have understood the point of the story, if one did happen to exist. After another minute, he was still standing in the threshold of my room. "Yeah?" I said.

"Oh, that's right. I was just wondering, what about those pumpkins in the back?"

Several months earlier, well before Leland arrived, my mother had decided to grow a pumpkin patch in our backyard, an idea owed both to what she perceived as unreasonable Halloween prices at a local supermarket – "Five whole dollars for a squash? We're carving jack-o-lanterns, not the Venus de Milo!" – as well as her desire to have something besides scorched

earth behind the house. She talked so much about pumpkin pie and cream, pumpkin ravioli, pumpkin bisque, roasted pumpkin seeds, the sight of beautiful orange globes in the moonlight, vines crawling underfoot, that I too became enamored with the thought of a pumpkin patch, though we two suffered from a major dearth of botanical vision. On one of the most humid days of the year, some grimy gardening book from the library as our only resource, we had taken spades outside and built smooth mounds of dirt and narrow ditches for irrigation, then pushed the teardrop seeds into the ground with our thumbs. But the soil was sandy and no good, and the patch itself had enjoyed almost no shade. Instead of a lawn full of pumpkins, we wound up with about two dozen gnarled balls shaped like a witch doctor's shrunken heads. My mother just smiled, observing that our stomachs did not know from ugly, though still she made no effort to harvest them, and soon fallen leaves blown from nearby trees had nearly buried the crop. Now, on the twelfth day Leland had been with us, it appeared that they would rot and blacken where they lay. I told him all of this, more or less.

"Why don't we pick them?" he said. "I hate to see things go to waste."

"Yeah, and then what?"

"We could go door-to-door and sell them to people, if you'd like." This idea appealed to me, as I lived in an unceasing state of penury after spending all of my monthly allowances on kites and licorice.

"Fine, okay, all right," I said.

The following Saturday morning, when the air smelled clear and fresh with the tang of moldy leaves and the soft ground squelched beneath our feet, my mother, Leland, and I began cutting stems just after sunrise. The vines had shriveled away, a positive sign, and the shells felt firm under the prick of my fingernails. Though they were small and light (I could lug two in my

arms without problems), they were aching with ripeness, fearing the mortal threat of an Indian summer. Pests had eaten those farthest from the house, but the harvest was so slight that no one remarked on the blemishes, lest we lose half our crop. My mother wiped away the clods of mud, as I heaped them in a wheelbarrow, afraid to bruise or otherwise hurt the precious things.

"Mind you don't hold them by the stem," Leland said to me, taking one from my hands, the first words he had passed along all morning. He cradled the base of the pumpkin in his palm and cupped his other hand around its back. "The stem contains the soul of the pumpkin. If the stem breaks off, you've got nothing left." I thought all pumpkins were full of other things, seeds and stringy mush, but said nothing and nodded. My mother, on the other hand, nearly spewed her Diet Coke across the grass.

"Leland, what are you talking about? Listen up, never peel a banana, either. I hear that's where they keep their super-egos." This sort of playful undermining seemed consistent with their relationship, as far as I had seen. Nonetheless, the conversation fizzled.

We piled the pumpkins in the wheelbarrow until it nearly capsized, then Leland and I walked down the block together, my mother standing at the curb, laughing. The pale sun made the pumpkins look sick and foul, and I noticed how many warts pocked each. When Leland finally asked what price I would charge, I thought, it will be a small miracle if we can give these all away for free, and part of me wished I had not put us all through the trouble, especially him, who could barely balance the swaying wheelbarrow.

After two hours, we had sold exactly zero, though some of the kinder people along the route had allowed me to blurt out my entire sales pitch uninterrupted, declined, and then offered a glass of apple cider, their flawlessly carved pumpkins snickering on the porch the whole time.

"You know," Leland said, as we finished the street, "I read a book where a man lives off pumpkins and nothing else. It sounded delicious, and I say we try it out."

We slogged in the house under the weight of five ugly pumpkins and let them crash along the kitchen counter. My mother walked into the kitchen and said, "What's this?" before almost collapsing in laughter over how we had failed to sell any tragically deformed pumpkins to our unsuspecting neighbors. Leland smiled and scratched his forehead absently. Then he lifted a pumpkin into the sink and began washing it under the tap, then another, and another, washing all five and drying them on a dishcloth. "Don't let the leftovers sprout again," my mother said. "That can happen. I don't need pumpkins coming through my basement walls."

He pulled a long knife from the drawer and flattened the cutting board on the counter, clearing away some breadcrumbs, took the first pumpkin before him, and plunged the blade in. He had sliced up three of them before he glimpsed me watching and said:

"Before I forget!" And he pressed five damp one-dollar bills into my palm.

And the whole time I watched him, as he sliced the pumpkins, and threw globs of seeds into a bowl, and scraped the mush from the shell, the whole time I thought, so what if he is or he isn't my father? He serried the slices on a baking sheet, dusted them with cinnamon and sugar, and placed them in the oven to brown. A boy needs someone who upsets him, who busts his mind on something new, like the impact of an oaf falling over a coffee table. He needs someone who, then, tries to make things better and to understand, and who behaves like his crash was just an early stage somersaulting, even if it clearly was not, he ruined a perfectly good coffee table, because maybe it really was, he has not yet realized it. And, if the sum of human experience is screw-ups plus fixes, he needs someone to suggest selling the ugliest pumpkins in the Midwest

door-to-door on the day before Halloween, then cooking them in butter and sugar and the stale autumn air of his mother's kitchen.

Leland opened the oven door a sliver and peeked inside. "I think we're almost there."

It smelled rapturous.

Above all, I think, after he has eaten his pound of spiced pumpkin flesh, and washed his face and picked the scab on his chin, and later gone to sleep with five dollars on his nightstand, his hands stinking of money, a boy needs someone who is willing, for him, to toil in the dimness and the dusk outside his bedroom window, swinging a hatchet, smashing up misfit pumpkins before the vines grow back to begin their slow creep into the hard, freezing ground.

*

North of Minneapolis

I. MENDING WALL

The trick, Ezra Kidd found, was to wedge the stones in tight as could be so that one did not need to use mortar to make them stick. Not only did it save time, to say nothing of money, but it also meant that when the frost and the snow arrived, the unfilled cracks would freeze and expand and pry loose the stones, and when the thaw came next spring, he would have to repair the gaps again before the slope of the orchard spilled onto the path and the land took back its shape. It made excellent work for the morning, the wet smells of soil and gravel lingering in the air, and he did not mind having to incur his father's scorn for performing the same job more than once because he, Ezra, had been the person to build the wall in the first place, five summers ago when he was seventeen, and he felt that gave him a certain right to maintain it however he pleased.

He puzzled together the final few stones, murmuring an incantation beneath his breath, and once it appeared that the wall would hold for another season, he started back toward the house. It lay at the bottom of a small hill, pinched between the apple orchard and a sprawling prairie field, and as Ezra rounded a curve in the path, he thought he could see the blistered paint of the screened-in porch from where he stood. His brother's pick-up truck was parked across the grass, its tires still snarled in snow chains, and he stopped and perched himself upon the wall, not wanting to return home just yet.

With him, he carried a paper sack of sugared almonds, which he now savored one by one, not caring that his fingers had caked with grim and grown a little bloodied. He sucked the glaze from each nut slowly, watching a herd of schoolchildren romp in the field below him. Though the land belonged to his family, over the years it had become somewhat of a public space, as the town developed and commercialized, and the constant trampling by little feet contributed to its

current state of shabbiness. All the same, Ezra liked their presence, darting about like minnows, and he especially liked the images that the playing children produced in his own head: tadpoles in a murky puddle, sharp little teeth, pond scum.

Feeling satisfied, he wiped his hands on his thighs, rose, and walked the short distance to the house, admiring the work he had completed earlier in the morning. He entered through the kitchen door near the garage to find Russell and his father eating Spam and eggs around a small foldaway card table. A black-and-white television was tuned to static on the kitchen counter. "Well?" Ezra said. They must have heard his approaching steps on the asphalt, as neither man said hello, they both only slouched further over their plates. A heap of scrambled eggs remained in a pan on the stove, a clean bowl resting beside it. He considered the scene for a moment, then decided it was kindness, not fortune, that had made his brother and his father save him the food. He spooned some eggs in the bowl and ate leaning against the sink.

"Well?" he said again, when he had finished.

"Hello, Ezra," Russell said, not looking up. "Was that a question?"

"What could I be asking about?"

A cool draft breached the window frame behind him as he turned to rinse the bowl. Two boys and a girl had staggered up the hill to where he had just rested and were mincing along the top of the wall like circus performers poised upon a tightrope. They must have waited for him to vanish. The bowl slipped from his fingers and clattered in the bottom of the sink. He feared the noise would resonate through the glass and might disturb the children, but if it did, they showed no reaction. His father, however, flinched and twisted about in his chair.

"Are those my shoes?" he said.

Ezra sluiced the greasy water from the bowl and left it upon a towel to dry.

"Yeah, strictly speaking. But you never wear them. It's unfair to the shoes, I think."

"Hm."

The girl had lost her balance and jumped off the wall, but as she tried to clamber back on, Ezra saw that she was too small to reach. The boys had moved farther down the path, almost around the curve, jousting with two short branches snapped from a birch, and the girl anxiously cast her eyes from them, to the wall, and back again. Then she scraped up a handful of gravel and hurled it toward them, stumbling from the path. Ezra spun from the window.

"Well?"

His brother withdrew a slim package from his raincoat and lazily passed it to him over the table, before retrieving a plum and a small knife from the same pocket. Blushing juice oozed down his hands as he clenched the plum in one fist and pared its flesh with the other. Battered fruit repulsed Ezra, and he looked away, to his father and the egg crumbs speckling his mouth. His father smiled, wishing him a happy birthday, and signaled that he should tear open the gift.

It was a pen. "For your writing," Russell explained to the scalped plum. "You know, for when you write." He hewed a narrow slice with the knife and let it slither down his throat.

"Thank you, that's very thoughtful, actually," Ezra said. "But I kind of wanted to know about the money, about the two-hundred dollars."

"Also, this came for you," his father said. "On Tuesday, actually. But here it is."

He brushed aside the newspaper on the table to reveal an envelope the shade of primrose, which he peeled up and extended to Ezra. Something sticky had bled through the paper, making the bottom third translucent in the pale morning light. If the cracked looking-glass symbolizes Irish art, then surely the soiled birthday card must symbolize American malaise, Ezra mused to himself. Without a glance, he placed the card inside his jacket and pinched the pen from its box.

"What color is the ink?"

"Black, of course."

"And what about the two-hundred dollars?"

His father stood up so sharply his chair crashed to the floor.

"Goddamn it, Ezra!"

"What? What is it? You've broken a spindle, see?"

"What do you think we used the money for?"

Ezra looked at the box in his hands, then at the upset chair, then at his father. "This pen cost you two-hundred dollars?"

"Well, not exactly," his father said, inspecting the fractured spindle with a tender thumb. "But Russ had a jam and, well, what do you think?"

"That's right," Russell said, slurping juice from his fingers.

Ezra closed the box and gazed once more out the window, checking his trousers for the sack of almonds. The children had gone from view, though a flat stone knocked from the wall revealed their recent presence. He sighed. Their elfish features belied the mischief in their little hearts. But that was how children were, he supposed, wild, equally prepared to bite as to kiss, the history within them impatient to unspool. He must remember to fix the wall later.

"All right," he said. "Thank you for the pen. Thank you, Papa." He kissed his father on the forehead, drank up a glass of tap water, and retired to the basement.

The smoky, faintly damp odor of his bedroom embraced him as he shot the bolt of the door and collapsed upon his bed. Around him, pillars of books towered, a neat wooden desk glowed hotly under a lamp, two smooth black beetles scuttled away unseen. He inhaled the stale stink of mildew and piss until his nostrils stung, slinging an arm over his eyes, and tried to sleep.

Upstairs, his father's heavy footfalls thumped like bruised fruit. Russell scraped his chair from the table and, a minute later, the kitchen door whined open and rattled shut. Ezra uncovered his eyes to see a shadow pass the window that crowned the room, and his father's steps went silent in the back of the house. He heaved himself upright, blinking. Something sharp poked his ribs – the card, he had forgotten.

It came from Nadine, he quickly detected. The handwriting possessed a hurried, childish quality he admired, how the pulp absorbed the ink before the brain even knew its meaning, how there seemed no interruption between her soul and her fingertips. Looking upon the envelope, a vapor rolled slowly across his consciousness like a dusty green tide, onward and outward, the images rose, his breast swelled, onward and outward, plunging him back into the past, forever onward and forever outward. The soft music of hairpins chiming on the hardwood, her dress slipping off her shoulder like a peasant girl, how rarely she bathed, and the sweat that pooled and dried in the little cup of her collarbone, each memory made his gut fizz and his blood foam, and he could hardly endure how much he felt, his heart might spring a leak. Onward and outward, onward and outward…

II. THE WORDSMITH

Their first meeting, the beginning of a strange and protracted affair, had happened during a long evening of drunken squalor, for him, and cheerful sobriety, for her – at least, as best he could remember. He had struggled the entire autumn to write something meaningful and submit it to the University literary journal, a short story about three brothers who travel to a tranquil lake in northern Ontario to dispense with their dead father's ashes. As the dust dissolves in the water, the middle brother – representative of himself – reflects upon how his father wasted his life and how he has too, how similar they were, how he might as well dive in and sink to the bottom until

the final breath escapes his lungs. Ezra hoped it would come off as poignant and melancholy, embroidered with wistful humor and fraternal tension, but instead, half was ripped straight from Dostoevsky, and the other half was pure junk. He could never attain a foothold in the narrative, his mind always betrayed his spirit, he demanded perfection from a story intended to convey human fallibility, and this irony was lost upon him, too. He could not write, he was an awful writer, he had washed up before he had really begun. His mother proposed he should write a story about a dog; he resolved to kill himself.

Such an idea solaced him because he had always believed in something fateful swirling beyond the limits of the known universe, and because he had physically knelt and prayed to GOD for inspiration and, receiving none, presumed that either GOD had more or less abandoned him or there was no GOD, and, in that case, he had nothing to lose. But he worried he might survive, and if he survived, he worried how prickly relations with his family might become thereafter. After all, it requires only one ghastly act of desperation to forever warp how people see you, and ultimately, the fear of living was stronger in him than the fear of dying.

And so he drank, blindly, wildly, robustly.

The semester had ended, early December of his second year, and he blundered around the deserted campus reciting scraps of poetry he had read, or dreamed, or invented, never knowing which, as his memory and his reveries slurred together. Thus, the following morning, Ezra could not be certain if had truly met the girl lying on the snowbank, blowing cold vapor to the stars, who said her name was Nadine. In the blackness of the night, he toppled over a low stone wall, sprawling to the ground, and found her whispering to herself. She looked like the oil painting of Ophelia floating in the river that drowned her, singing songs, surrounded by flower petals, her

arms wide and her gaze upward. The alcohol had swamped his brain, and he decided to rest beside this odd figure.

"I don't know that picture," she said, as he lamely described how he had beheld her, and for a while afterward they were silent. Then she asked, "What's your favorite word?"

"I'm Ezra."

"No, what word do you like best?"

He deliberated for a moment, then elected for FIRECRACKER. "I like its shape," he said. "I like how its shape looks like its sound, and how its sound feels like its meaning." She nodded and, encouraged, he went on. "If we spelled it as B-O-O-K, or pronounced it as *castle*, or denoted it as 'the four-legged creature that howls at the moon,' the effect would be ruined." He could not tell how lucid these thoughts were to her, but he liked how naturally they came to him, and if he had not felt the abrupt surge of sickness in his throat, he might have continued. Instead, he rolled on his hip and retched in the snow, then turned back to her and apologized.

Rather than recoil in disgust, she pulled herself up from the bank and offered him her hand, laughing as he bashfully kicked snow upon the steaming mess. What a queer, inauspicious opening scene! The lush and the freckled stranger, tramping through the evening among white columns of frosted bark, across the eerily empty quadrangle, between limestone buildings that glowered in the dark – why she abided him, he could not fathom. He said very little, hazarding only unsure leaps over narrow ditches, but she seemed happy to speak about herself in answer to his questions, pausing every so often to fumble a few meters ahead and pitch a snowball at him or to have him reprise why exactly he liked the word *firecracker*. In the pale, ghostly light of the sodium lamps, he saw the soft down of her cheeks, the softness of her hair uplifted in the wind.

She sniffed, drying the wetness of her nose with the back of her palm, and the simple girlishness of her manner aroused his wild spirit.

The alcohol had warmed in his bloodstream, and he felt, listening to her, as if his bones had been scraped of all their marrow, leaving only nerve. He did not know women very well; they seemed to understand something he did not. But, for his whole life, he had suspected that when, by fate or by accident, he should meet the eyes of one like him, alone and hopeful, striving and falling, alone, lonesome and desirous, she would fill him like the glow within a Chinese lantern, and like a Chinese lantern, lift him skyward to where he might somehow reach a thing like grace.

So he trusted as he loped beside her in the cold hibernal air.

Ezra longed to be bold, to enfold her in his arms, to kiss her fully, but he could not muster the courage, and he simply listened to her voice, clear and bright, reproaching himself for being such a fool and a coward. When finally they arrived at the front door of her dormitory – he had not even realized a destination existed – she said goodnight, pawing her keys and looking rather wistful. He must act, he knew, or else risk that the portal to whatever he experienced that night would close up, the magic plastered behind. He must act and, asking whether it might be fine to mail her a letter over the winter holiday, he promised to write.

"I am a wordsmith," he told her, and the term sounded less fatal tumbling from his mouth than he had imagined it would.

In the morning, as the frozen sunshine crashed upon his skull, Ezra strained to summon each splinter of memory that pierced his brain. It was not a Nabokov tale, not a nocturnal vision, and he had not the good poetic sensibility to conceive such serendipity himself. It had happened, Nadine had happened, and he would write her a letter and be happy. He loafed in bed for hours

that day, until the pale shafts of light had fallen upon every wall, feeling content for the first time in a long while.

III. "JESUS H. CHRIST!"

Ezra had held the envelope for nearly twenty minutes, his fingers oily from the breakfast stain, the orbit of his vision widening and sharpening, the dusty sun too fierce for his eyes, his pupils too dilated to perceive. He shaded his face with a cupped hand, his eyes roaming across the piles of books strewn upon the floor, the rot of the bottommost pages from where the basement had flooded during an autumn thunderstorm, the dark mold creeping up the walls toward the light. His home, his sanctuary, the great source of privacy and privation in his life. It had been the coal chamber of the house earlier in the century, and he liked to envision the black anthracite pouring down the chute, a mix-up in the ledgers perhaps, burying him as he slept.

He could not read the card yet, his fingers rebelled, he slipped it back near his heart.

Then, rising from the bed, he emerged from the room to discover his father ducked in the cellar hole, rifling through jars of peach preserves and canned tomatoes stored from last season. It demanded quite an effort to descend the stairs without creaking, and the old man must have crawled down to listen through the walls, he guessed. But Ezra never spoke aloud to himself, the soliloquy was the surest clue of cracking-up, and the disappointment of his father's spoiled plan was plain in how he weighed two identical cylinders of lima beans in his hands, behaving as if he did not realize his youngest son inhabited this subterrarium.

"Oh, hello!"

"I'll just step out for a minute, Papa."

His father, having settled upon the visibly less abused of the bean cans, squinted at him through the gloom, his eyeglasses absent from his bulbous nose. "Oh, okay?"

"Marvelous."

"What's that mail you've gotten?"

"It's nothing, really."

"Right."

Ezra lumbered up the stairs, stole a fat chunk of soda bread from the basket upon the oven, and paced out the kitchen door, following the gravel trail he had trodden an hour earlier in the reverse direction. The wind smelled sweet and the bread softened on his tongue, and for a brief moment, he feared he might soar from his heels, trumpeting to the heavens *O frabjous day!* But he stifled the impulse and, besides, in the distance loomed heavy clouds across the plains, gnarled as the apples in their trees, awaiting nimble fingers.

He strode over the big, flat stone that had fallen on the path, continuing on his journey, then doubled-back, crouched, and gripped it with both hands. He could not afford to repair the wall now, but if the children returned, they would see that someone had noticed their destruction and perhaps comport themselves more nicely. As he lifted the stone to his breast, he glimpsed the shape of his father observing him from the window above the sink, and without looking back, dumped it on the slope and kept walking.

Of course, he had never written the letter to Nadine.

Stupid! vain! childish! The epithets thrashed him as he slept, as he waked, as he spooned watery cereal to his mouth like the feeble-minded dolt he had ceaselessly proven himself to be. The perfection he craved had thwarted him again, had made reconciling the infinitude of his heart with the limits of his mind impossible. And if the creative anguish he suffered was bad, the sorrow of losing Nadine would be far, far worse. All of the joy he had experienced, rolling lazily in a hot clump of bedclothes throughout that winter morning, the stale tang of beer in his mouth,

the soft peal of her lips sacralizing *firecracker* in his ears – it all had fled from him like a fawn from the report of a gun.

He conceded that he might be a little melodramatic.

Yet when he had arrived home from the University for the holidays two weeks before Christmas Day on an afternoon three years past, Ezra truly believed something within him had changed. His – what was it? – for Nadine would feed the limpid spring of his art and permit him to write, first and especially to her. But he had sinned against the world, been indifferent to life, and made a farce of GOD's gifts to him, absurdly wishing to spill his own blood, and now he thought he understood the reciprocity of the universe, the corn of his misery had fallen into the ground and finally brought forth fruit.

Still he could not create.

Dear Nadine, staring at the page before him, *When I am with you, I feel as if I exist in the sparkling space just above a freshly poured seltzer*… thief! He had plundered the very words. *When I picture your eyes, the stars above weep in ecstasy*… rubbish! What color were her eyes, anyhow? *When I flopped over that damn wall (as you recall, undoubtedly), I must have alighted in paradise*… futile! Only Spenser could conjure a paradise less convincing.

Dearest Nadine, Do you like stories about dogs?

The decisive stroke had come, mercifully, in the blooming hours of Christmas morning, as they – he, Russell, his father, and still his mother – rumbled up the driveway, home from the Midnight Mass at Saint Gabriel's, the crumbly snow churning like shortbread beneath their tires. Ezra had known none of the hymns and none of the refrains, Russell had sneezed all throughout the homily, and his father, having been reared in a decidedly humanist household, had eventually left the pew with a loud stumble and spent the remainder of the liturgy listening to public radio in

the station wagon. His mother, however, reveled in the music and the "pageantry" of the whole event, remarking more than once to him on how the ceiling of the church resembled, to her mind, a huge hard-boiled egg dipped in pink and yellow dyes. They had attended at Ezra's insistence, his final endeavor to correct his soul's misdeeds, and, though the maneuver had not gone exactly well, as the Kidd family drove homeward, his heart brimmed with hope and religion, preparing to enter the arena once more.

The growl of the engine silenced before the house. In the front yard, about fifteen meters from the screened-in porch, stood a wooden box the size of a small bureau meant to recreate a stable, displaying within it an elaborate nativity scene of angels and shepherds, an ox and an ass, Mary and Joseph, the premature Magi, and myriad other plaster figurines, excluding the Christ Child, who had yet to arrive. The crèche had belonged to his paternal great-grandfather, and while his own father might not stomach the pomp of the Church, he did respect tradition, and the stable had appeared in the front yard for nearly five decades uninterrupted. To illuminate its artistry in the night, a strand of white light bulbs looped around the frame of the box, and to protect against vandals, a curtain of chicken wire shielded its contents. As for who might deface a nativity scene, the question never really arose.

His father jogged inside the house to retrieve the Christ figurine, having refused to lay Him in the manger until the day of His birth, and returned gripping it like a torch, while the rest of the family loitered about the stable. The air was mild, the sky hazy, and a pool of slush had formed in the shallow depression below the wooden box, in which his father stepped as he began fiddling with the chicken wire, half-shadowed in the glow of the bulbs. Ezra watched him with boredom, composing the letter to Nadine in his head, searching for the right words to express all the beautiful images that the Mass had evoked within his spirit. All feelings are ineffable, he

thought, the irreducible sums of experience, real and imagined, and the emotions assigned to them were merely counterfeits of what truly resides in the human heart. What was *sad*, what was *triumphant*? *Happiness* was the perfume of rotting apples on the orchard floor, a hot shower in an empty house, a lover combing your hair when you fell ill, and a million other things blended. He wanted to make Nadine understand this, too, and, GOD willing, he would, in his letter, which he would write as soon as the Christ Child took His place in the stable.

The wire had done its job to prevent his father from reaching the manger, and everyone had become rather impatient. "Frank," his mother yawned, "let's move it or lose it, please and thanks." At length, and after much frustration, he chose simply to tear away the wire from the nails that hung it, unwinding the screen in a clumsy coil and humming "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" with slightly crazed intensity. What, precisely, occurred next, Ezra did not witness himself, for while he trained his eyes upon his father, his mind floated freely elsewhere, thinking of the letter to Nadine. Somehow, in clawing off the chicken wire, the string of light bulbs had been dragged down too, and the combination of the electrical current, the metal wire, and the slush pool produced a jolt strong and sudden enough to knock his father from his feet.

The stable crashed to the ground, his mother shrieked, the figurines tumbled throughout the snow like unexploded mortar shells. Mary and a Wise Man had wound up, rather profanely, crushed underneath his father, and as Russell hauled away the snarled confusion of chicken wire, he too suffered a small shock. His mother screamed again and, pitifully, the lights flickered out. He held his breath, the euphoria of the Mass not yet escaping his heart, and waited for someone to speak in the hollow darkness of Christmas morning.

Finally, his father said:

"Jesus H. Christ!" in a voice that sounded like a curse, but might have been a prayer.

Oh, what man alive could write after observing such ugliness! The jagged edges of life sickened him, the corrupted and the vulgar. He wanted the purity of black words on white pages, words depicting people more virtuous than was he, pages leafed by clean fingers. Once Russell had used a whip of licorice as a page marker in an edition of C.S. Lewis, during the month of August, and, when Ezra complained, his mother plucked the soiled pages from the binding, as if it were a logical solution. Filth and debauchery had no place in his values, except for the writerly drink or twelve. Sex, too, was a problem. He had yet to crack how one preserved himself, preserved his self, when the feat required such an intimate exchange of feelings and of fluids. Not that he desired to withhold from sex – he did not. But much like the Chinese lantern drifting to heaven, he preferred not to chase such a thing, instead allowing it to come as it may.

As Ezra walked along the gravel path to where it joined the road, then up into the narrow town, his father's stare still hot on his shoulders, the birthday card still stiff in his pocket, he did not blame his past self for quitting the entire misguided business of writing the letter to Nadine. From the brewery in the distance, a thick plume of smoke curled over rooftops, and he tried to smell the odor of wheat that rose from the building in the morning. It had made no difference, he realized. He had not written to her, and it had made no difference, had not affected anything, and that fact said all that needed to be said about his writing.

But he was no longer a writer, he had to keep reminding himself.

Past the tobacco shop, past the pharmacy, he cut through the public garden, where waxy clumps of mushrooms ballooned from the soil in shades of snot, and crossed the threshold into Kinbote's Market with the sneer on his lips located somewhere between gassy and glum. He did not wish to be there, amid the troughs of marred eggplants and browning limes, the putrid scent of fish scales and pickle juice bubbling across the tile, the glass case in which a whole pig stewed

over a bed of ice chips, carved cleanly down the middle, as pink within as without. It nauseated him, his body physically revolted. He came home with the metallic stink of pork blood beneath his fingernails and could not raise a fork to his mouth, the stench was so foul. He resolved not to dawdle for a second longer than necessary, though Crandall spied him as soon as he entered.

"Come to work on your birthday?" he smiled, his arms full of thirsty cabbage.

"Twenty-second year to heaven," Ezra said, "and never more industrious."

"Did you consider what I asked of you?"

"I never do."

He bowled through the doors leading to the stockroom, the hinges squealing behind him, and unbolted his locker with a violent jerk. Crandall trailed after him, still cradling the cabbages, and watched as Ezra emptied the contents of the locker to the ground. Apart from the uncorked wine bottles and pilfered newspapers, innumerable scraps of Herzog-like reflections, recorded on slivers of cardboard atop soup cans and pipes of almond paste, fluttered like whirlybirds – the offal of his past sixteen months. He piled them in a mound and dropped it, with a blunt whish, in the garbage bin, then turned, lifted the cabbages from Crandall's arms, and repeated the action.

"Well, that should be about it, I believe."

"You're mistaken," said his friend. "We could do well together."

"I know," Ezra said, "and you'll do well alone."

"What's the plan instead?"

Ezra shrugged, limply.

"Finish school. Maybe I'll become an attorney. Maybe I'll make a run for the Senate."

"Senator Kidd!" Crandall crowed. "I should call you the healthiest man in hospice."

"So long, then."

For a strange beat, a sleuth snooping from the shadows might have expected the two men to embrace, but whatever faintly mournful thing passed between them passed swiftly, and Ezra discovered himself upon the unswept sidewalk across from the market before he had had time enough to lament not saying something more to Crandall. Soon he began the winding journey home, the heavy clouds in the air above knotted and frothing, threatening to untangle at any moment.

What made him feel so low?

Again and again, the thought of Nadine whirled about his brain, the birthday card in his coat both a charm and a jinx – thus, the man who imagines the delights of a travelling carnival will find his dreams infested with grotesque visions of the waking thing, its joys distorted into terror, its lurking disquiet further deepened. Every memory of her polluted his present, often in bizarre and wishful ways. He might wander through the city of the University and happen across a square of pavement in which some cheeky individual had inscribed I WAS HERE in the drying cement, then hunt the crowd, half-expectantly, for her waving to him with a dripping pointer. And as he indulged his onanistic ritual, anointing the shame of his heart, he would hear her voice murmuring his name, not in any erotic sense, but merely the cruel tinnitus of the forlorn mind. This phenomenon, the baffling belief that she loomed always close to him, remained just as vivid on this spring day, in his twenty-second year to heaven, as it had on another spring day, two years earlier, when, after weeks of dipsomania and self-pity, the equinox had broken the spell, and he had nearly broken his nose on the crown of Nadine's sweetly corkscrewed head, straining to read a paperback Coetzee as he walked.

"Why, my old, sick pal, Mr. Firecracker!" she said, not unkindly. "The wordsmith."

He blindly retrieved the fumbled book, his snout smarting and his eyes stinging. Though he could barely see her through his reflexive tears, he would discern the valved lilt of her voice until the pulse went quiet in his veins. "You promised you would write. What've you got to say for yourself?"

What had he to say?

Stunned by the odds of this second meeting, even less likely than the first, Ezra blurted some ludicrous lie about suffering from a rather consumptive cough that left him bedbound for the holidays, as she studied him with a squint. But before long, they found themselves following the same path as in the wintertime, Nadine pinching the golden hairs of her arm, listening, Ezra confessing his wasted efforts to liberate himself, to efface himself, to repent and to create, and to create for her. She understood, he believed. The simian fingers of providence had again probed his world, thrusting him into her exactly when he least deserved it, and suddenly the chance of an evening now seemed the fate of a lifetime. It might feel absurd to share his troubles with this person whom he did not know, and to – but that was just it! He did know her, her and no one else.

For the balance of the spring and into the summer, they met sporadically, never planned, yet never quite accidental. A soft knock might come on the front door, and one would answer to find the other merrily despairing over how he had just purchased far too many macaroons for a single person to eat unassisted, or vaguely alluding to some silent picture she had criticized in a film class showing at the local theatre. They lunched often together when the weather was nice, cream cheese and cucumber in light straw hats, and took long bicycle rides along the river, each swearing that he or she would pedal to the Gulf of Mexico if the other did not capitulate first. Civilized business, they joked, very Continental, indeed. They burned the diurnal hours with the

same gusto as robber barons lighting their cigars on flaming treasury bonds, inventing stories about handprints smeared upon a shop window or a black dog challenging the gaze of his watery reflection. She intended to study medicine and could identify every bone in his hand by touch alone, while he read to her aloud, garbling the Latin of Joyce and the French of Hemingway, but still proud to hold the volumes before her. The inconstant nature of their relationship inspired him to rise each morning greedily, prepared to snatch his fistful of happiness from the common trough if she came to him, or to let it drop if she did not.

More often, she did not come.

But as slipped every day, so tumbled every night, and every night he was confronted with the suspicion that he was not a creature to love or be loved, that something essentially human still escaped him, that the gloom of his soul would rot him from the inside out. Then he would awake, crossly, sweating, to his sheets twisted about his ankles and the soft roar of a freight train rumbling through the dusk.

V. THE INDIFFERENT

Ezra had all but ruined his father's shoes. They had been rather too snug from the first moment he crammed in his feet, but now, as he sloshed through dark puddles all along the road home, the rain battering his face, he sensed them tighten, the skin of his heels pink and sore. He pondered the mechanics of hurling them in the creek and finishing the march barefoot, and had eventually decided to do just this, when the lights of an automobile illumined his steps from the direction of the town, and he turned to see Russell's truck braking beside him.

"Well?" his brother said, with a mirthless smirk. "Come on." Ezra climbed in the cabin of the truck from the passenger side and they motored onward, the rhythmic squeak of the wiper blades the only sound. Among the orchard trees, as they neared the house, he saw a small clump

of children, the happy race of little heathens, seeking cover from the rain, licking drops of dew from their lips, dancing as if in pagan ceremony. Wood sprites, elves, fairies – all were welcome on the Kidd estate. The truck swerved down the driveway and, at last, Ezra spoke.

"Look, Russ, I need the money, please."

"If I had it, I wouldn't've borrowed it."

"Even so, I need my money."

Russell plowed across the grass, throwing a mist of mud and rainwater upon the windows of the truck, then jerked to a stop and cut the engine with a fluid motion. He heard the twang of his brother's tongue washing his teeth, in his heavy breath, sniffed cheap rye and garlic, behind his ears, spotted a white lump of shaving lather.

"I've got something cooking. You'll get your money next weekend."

"But that'll be too late—"

Interior of a courtroom.

JUDGE *shuffles papers idly on a huge oak desk.*

EZRA *enters, surrounded by three resolute, somewhat Semitic-looking gentleman, and walks to a table right downstage, hobbling a bit, as if his shoes were slightly too small.*

Brief tableau.

JUDGE: And, in the case of *Ezra J. Kidd vs. People of Minnesota,* how does the defendant plea to the charge of murder in the second-degree?

EZRA: (*firmly*) Not guilty, Your Honor.

Pause.

(*thinking*) In any case, not criminally responsible.

Pause.

(*convinced*) Irresponsible, really.

Pause.

(*quietly, yet expressively*) I mean, he was my own brother, so just guess how *I* feel.

—But he was not a Karamazov, for the love of GOD. He watched as Russell scrambled from the truck and ran within the house, leaving him to listen to the tap of the rain upon the metal roof, the dampened birthday card melting upon his chest.

So quick bright things come to confusion.

Nadine!

While the bloom in her cheeks and the grace of her limbs never failed to stir his spirit, she might just as soon impishly crutch an elbow upon his thigh as crudely mention the leer of another male suitor. But he was a fool and a sensualist, and there were few things he refused to do for someone with dark eyes and breasts like champagne glasses, however much she bruised him, and he sensed something in her that had always eluded the riot of his own heart.

Early one Sunday, he went to her. She had just bathed, and her blood seemed to glow as she poured him coffee, the brightness of the morning in her fresh, warm face. They were quiet, until her hand brushed his, and he choked at how gentle was her touch. Then she led him to her bed, and he put her fingers to his mouth in silent worship. She did not let the long braid from her hair, her milky skin dusted with freckles, and he had said, "I can love both fair and brown, but please, oh, please, give the girl some freckles!" The line had been lost on her, but he did not care because the white of her feet, long and small, was so lovely. He shivered, embarrassed since he knew not what to do, embarrassed because he had bravely clung to such threadbare notions of virtue for so long. Her slender legs were cool as she slipped beside him, and the fever of her kiss, clotted cream upon her careless breath, nearly cracked the vault of heaven. He imagined he must be in love. Afterward, he scorched toast for her, thinking it impossible not to love someone who cooks you toast, fearing that she did not feel the same or worse, she felt the same for others. But he did not ask the question because he had liked the sound of her kiss in his ears too much,

and, as the days drained away, yet the doubt endured, he could not be upset because, in his heart, he truly had not known.

And as he reflected now upon this fact, he wondered if the love he felt for Nadine as she crumbled bread and butter upon her pillows was less a key and more a lock pick, and he cursed his cold, hollow soul.

He concealed the news of his having left the University until an afternoon just before the close of November, when Russell telephoned to tell him that their mother had abandoned their father to pursue a new life in Arizona, and Ezra decided that divulging another small failure of his might restore some sense of equilibrium to the family, and, in any case, things could not be much more shattered, so he might as well let it be known. Four days later, he returned home to eat spaghetti and meatballs with his father and his brother on Thanksgiving Day, thinking how unhappiness always proved a spicy drink, and how his tastes ran piquant these days. The coal of creation had faded within him, and he was relieved because he was no longer a writer.

Nadine visited him only once to say she did not understand, and as they sat together upon his wall, her movements so familiar to him, but so irreconcilable with this place, he wondered about a story he had heard of a famous artist who smashed a plain ceramic vase and had seen the value of the thing almost prick the ionosphere when it later went to auction, and he thought perhaps that was love – buying the brokenness. Then he thought, for the artist, it must be nice work, if you can get it, and it was too bad words did not break when you let them go, that was a real mint to be made for folks like him.

She looked at him with all the liquid frailty of a body about to wake, and he knew, as sure as he knew the moon rolled round the earth , he had been absolved of whatever sins committed in a previous life had forced the author's instinct upon him and that this was the end, there was

nothing more of him to give. She asked, quietly, did he still believe in the promise of grace and in the grace of his own creation, then?

"Yes," he replied, "but I was speaking of this world."

VI. SOUTH OF MINNEAPOLIS

The trick, Ezra found, was to wedge the stones in tight as could be so that he did not need mortar to make them stick. Not only did it save time, but it also meant that when the frost and the snow arrived next spring, he would have to fix the gaps before the slope of the orchard spilled onto the path and the land took back its shape. He lugged the flat stone into the hole it had left, and slumped down on the wall, where he had reposed hours before. The rain dwindled and stopped, and by the time he had pinched Nadine's birthday card to him from its sodden envelope and read it twice, a pale thread of gold had even spun across the sky.

She had been awarded a fellowship in South America and would be gone for twenty-eight months: she would see him or she would not see him, she guessed.

Would she see him?

In the prairie field below, loud shouts of joy erupted, the children resuming their games. Ezra wetted his arid throat, and as he did, saw the figure of a small girl trailing behind the others, plucking bristly burs from her socks, dodging muddy puddles. She lingered for a full moment, unsure of her footing, before springing safely to a patch of dry ground, mopping her brow with an upturned palm, pleased by the triumph. And then, as if having heard a faint, familiar cry, she lifted her chin upward and looked to where a man sat watching upon the slope. Ezra staggered to his feet, raising his plump hand in farewell, and called something lovely and forgotten.

But her eyes were already elsewhere, and his voice was far too distant.

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